Replay

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Spis treści/Contents

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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; *Cozynauts* (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).

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[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

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[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,

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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 wholesomnes" 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 in-justices, 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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Gry przytulne i opór poprzez troskę

Gra *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) w krótkim czasie osiągnęła światową rozpoznawalność. Nic dziwnego: swój debiut miała w pierwszych miesiącach pandemii COVID-19 i globalnych lockdownów, dzięki czemu udało jej się dotrzeć nie tylko do osób grających, ale też tych, które dotychczas raczej nie miały styczności z grami cyfrowymi (Hernandez, 2020; Khan, 2020). Zarówno gra, jak i konsola Nintendo Switch sprzedały się wtedy w rekordowych ilościach, a wiele osób dzieliło doświadczenie niewymagającej, niestresującej rozgrywki polegającej na zbieraniu jabłek, szukaniu skamielin czy dekorowaniu swoich domków i wysp, chwaląc się nimi przed znajomymi, którzy, nie mogąc uczynić tego w rzeczywistości, przybywali w wirtualne odwiedziny (Fang, 2023; Yee i Sng, 2022; Zhu, 2021). Pod tym względem stan pandemii był istotnym okresem dla gier cyfrowych, które, za sprawą tego wzmożonego zainteresowania, wkroczyły do dyskursów popularnych nie jako teksty pełne przemocy, ale jako medium dojrzalsze, zdolne do wzbudzania różnorodnych emocji (Kneer i Ward, 2021).

Termin *gry przytulne* (*cozy games*)[1], przejęty od środowiska osób tworzących gry oraz dziennikarstwa growego, w ciągu ostatnich kilku lat zyskał popularność także w akademickich dyskursach groznawczych (Chan i in., 2022; Fang, 2023; Sullivan, Stanfill i Salter, 2023; Waszkiewicz i Bakun, 2020; Wäppling, Walchsho-

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1 W polskim dyskursie nieobce jest wykorzystanie anglojęzycznego *cozy games*. Na potrzeby tego tekstu decydujemy się jednak korzystać z terminu *gry przytulne*, które rozpowszechnione jest w polskich środowiskach osób zajmujących się groznawstwem.

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fer i Lewin, 2022; Youngblood, 2022). Osoby badające ten temat zwracają uwagę na sposób, w jaki przytulność może manifestować się w ludycznej, narracyjnej oraz estetycznej warstwie gier. Podkreślają, że gry te tworzą niezwykle zróżnicowaną, pojemną kategorię, a należące do niej tytuły potrafią różnić się niemal wszystkim: od trybu rozgrywki do treści. I tak na przykład *Slime Rancher* (Monomi Park, 2017) wykorzystuje elementy strzelanki, a w *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021) rozgrywka ogranicza się do rozpakowywania pudeł po przeprowadzce; *Cozynauts* (NeoNoir Studios, 2024) to z kolei gra osadzona w realiach science fiction, która pozwala osobom grającym eksplorować nowe planety, a *Fae Farm* (Phoenix Labs, 2023) to symulator życia na farmie, który, zgodnie z nazwą, jest osadzony w pełnym magii, eliksirów i mieczy świecie fantasy.

Mimo to łatwo przyporządkowujemy wszystkie te tytuły do kategorii gier przytulnych, kierując się przede wszystkim ich warstwą wizualną. Estetyka przytulności jest intuicyjnie rozpoznawalna i cechuje się jasną lub pastelową kolorystyką, obłymi czy okrągłymi kształtami oraz pozytywną, podnoszącą na duchu muzyką. Postacie, nawet jeżeli przedstawiają potwory, duchy i inne stworzenia zazwyczaj niekojarzone z uroczą estetyką, zaprojektowane są tak, by wzbudzać pozytywne emocje. Nieobecne są za to elementy horroru czy napięcia, mające na celu przestraszyć osoby grające czy wymusić rywalizację i założyć presję czasu. Porażka, jeśli w ogóle jest możliwa, zazwyczaj nie jest uciążliwa i nie niesie za sobą zbyt poważnych konsekwencji. Pozwala nam to zanurzyć się w działania powtarzalne i prozaiczne, a nawet pozornie nudne (Alharthi i in., 2018), takie jak ubieranie postaci czy urządzanie ich cyfrowych domków jedynie dla własnej satysfakcji. Rozgrywka jest często przyjemna i nieuciążliwa i zapewnia poczucie bezpieczeństwa, nawet jeśli sama historia dotyczy poważnych tematów i trudnych emocji.

Chociaż na gruncie badań gier cyfrowych zainteresowanie przytulnością koncentruje się przede wszystkim na estetyce oraz elementach ludycznych, warto zauważyć, że zarówno na gruncie psychologii, jak i socjologii studia nad znaczeniem i reakcjami na *elementy urocze* (ang. *cuteness*)[2] przyniosły znaczące rezultaty. Jak zauważają na przykład osoby redaktorskie książki *The Aesthetic and Affects of Cuteness*, początki użycia słowa *uroczy* (ang. *cute*) można odnaleźć już w latach 50. XIX wieku. Wówczas termin ten był „powiązany z dziećmi, kobietami, sferą domową i specyficzną formą tego [co Lori Mesh nazywa] «spektaklem kobiecości»" (Dale i in., 2016, s. 2)[3], a powiązanie cech kobiecych z tym, co postrzegane jako *urocze*, jest nadal obecne w popularnym dyskursie, mimo że współcześnie sam termin

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[2]   Chociaż *cuteness* może być tłumaczone jako *słodkość* lub *słodycz*, uważamy *uroczość* za określenie bardziej adekwatne.

[3]   Wszystkie tłumaczenia własne.

coraz częściej pojawia się również w kontekście zachodniej i azjatyckiej koncepcji męskości (Baudinette, 2017; DeAngelis, 2016)**4**.

Równie istotnym przedmiotem badań są psychologiczne reakcje na uroczość oraz jej społeczne znaczenie, zarówno wśród zwierząt, jak i ludzi. Konrad Lorenz (1970), nazywamy „ojcem współczesnych badań nad uroczością" (Sherman i Haidt, 2011, s. 248), choć początkowo interesował się reakcjami zaobserwowanymi wśród ptaków, zauważył, że również u ludzi uroczość stanowi „wrodzony wyzwalacz" rodzicielskich reakcji opiekuńczych. W odniesieniu do tego Gary Sherman i Jonathan Haidt dodatkowo stwierdzają, iż przechodząc na wyższy poziom ogólności, uroczość można potraktować u ludzi jako bodziec do socjalizacji. Jeżeli uroczość jest „afektywnym mechanizmem rozpoznawania społecznej wartości ludzkich dzieci i odpowiadania na nią […], jej pierwotną […] funkcją jest zachęta do towarzystwa, wyzwalająca zaangażowanie w interakcje społeczną z dzieckiem" (s. 248).

W reakcji na postrzeganą uroczość zachodzi jeszcze jedna istotna konsekwencja: obiekty postrzegane jako urocze są nie tylko personifikowane, ale też często uznawane za członków naszego otoczenia. To właśnie dlatego tak istotna jest uroczość zabawek oraz tak często dochodzi do antropomorfizacji uroczych przedmiotów lub zwierząt (Sherman i Haidt, 2011), co w kontekście gier cyfrowych analizuje między innymi Emma Reay (2021, 2022), pisząc o figurze „beztroskiego dziecka" (ang. *Blithe Child*). Odnosząc się do takich tytułów jak chociażby *Little Big Planet* (Media Molecule, 2014), *Unravel* (Coldwood Interactive, 2016) czy *Fall Guys* (Mediatonic, 2020), Reay omawia pojawiającą się w grach praktykę polegającą na upodabnianiu awatara osoby grającej do pluszowej zabawki. Według autorki „radosna, zawrotna, cherubinowa postać «beztroskiego dziecka» funkcjonuje zarówno jako znak ikoniczny, jak i bodziec afektywny" (Reay, 2021b, s. 132), ponieważ konstruuje tym samym specyficzną relację opartą na potrzebie zapewnienia opieki osobie grającej i jej awatarowi – lecz także typową dla zabaw dziecięcych destrukcyjność.

Omawiając koncepcję słodkości, warto wspomnieć o japońskim *kawaii* (可愛い, かわいい), które według Sharon Kinselli opisuje to, co „dziecinne; to, co celebruje słodycz, [co jest] urocze, niewinne, czyste, proste, autentyczne, delikatne, wrażliwe, słabe i społecznie niedoświadczone" (Kinsella, 1995, s. 226). Współcześnie termin ten jest często używany także na Zachodzie, między innymi w odniesieniu do postaci, „które są zwierzętami lub są niemal-zwierzętami, o które trzeba się troszczyć lub które trzeba wytresować" (Yano, 2004, s. 57). Do postaci takich zaliczyć można Hello Kitty lub bohaterów z serii *Pokémon* czy *Animal Crossing* właśnie (Kinsella, 1995; Kovarovic, 2011).

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4 Oczywiście, nie jest to bez znaczenia, biorąc pod uwagę istotność japońskich kontekstów produkcyjnych oraz ich wpływ na globalny rynek gier.

Groznawcze definicje przytulności

Zanim termin *gry przytulne* uzyskał popularność w groznawstwie, osoby badające ten rodzaj gier posługiwały się różnymi terminami, uzależnionymi od konkretnych cech danych tytułów, na których następnie koncentrowały się w swoich analizach. Pojawiały się następujące określenia: *gry ambientowe* (ang. *ambient games*; Fizek, 2018; Hjorth i Richardson, 2020), *gry empatyczne* (ang. *empathy games*; Boltz i in., 2015; Kors i in., 2016; Pozo, 2018), *gry przyjaźni* (ang. *friendship games;* Harrington, 2018), *gry osobiste* (ang. *personal games;* Parker, 2013), *małe gry* (ang. *small games;* McCrea, 2011), *gry powolne* (ang. *slow games;* Navarro-Remesal, 2019, 2022), gry typu *zaopiekuj-się-i-zaprzyjaźnij* (ang. *"tend-and-befriend"*; Code, 2017; Ruberg i Scully-Blaker, 2021) czy *gry troski* (ang. *wholesome games*; Knight, 2019).

Najczęstszą obecnie definicję przytulności zawdzięczamy raportowi spisanemu przez Daniela Cooka, opracowanemu przez dziewięcioosobową grupę podczas warsztatów odbywających się w czasie konferencji Project Horseshoe w 2018 roku[5]. W raporcie przytulność omówiona została w kategoriach tego, „jak mocno gra przywołuje fantazję o bezpieczeństwie, obfitości i miękkości" (Short i in., 2018). Cechy te zdefiniowano w następujący sposób:

1. Bezpieczeństwo: „Gra przytulna charakteryzuje się *brakiem* niebezpieczeństw oraz ryzyka. W grze przytulnej nic nie zagraża nam na poważnie, dlatego osoba grająca nie musi obawiać się *straty* ani *zagrożenia*. Na poczucie bezpieczeństwa wpływa rozpoznawalność otoczenia oraz jego przewidywalność, jak również przestrzeń umożliwiająca otwarcie się i okazywanie emocji bez negatywnych konsekwencji".

2. Obfitość: „Przytulna gra niesie ze sobą wrażenie *obfitości*. Potrzeby z niższego poziomu piramidy Maslowa (jedzenie, schronienie) zostały lub są zaspokojone, zapewniając [osobom grającym] przestrzeń do pracy nad potrzebami wyższymi (pogłębianie relacji, docenienie piękna, samorealizacja, troskliwość, przynależność). Niczego nie brakuje, nic nie jest pilne i nieuchronne".

3. Miękkość: „Przytulne gry wykorzystują silne *sygnały* estetyczne, aby informować osoby grające o tym, że znajdują się one w środowisku wywołującym *niski poziom stresu*, pełnym dostatku i bezpieczeństwa. Są to delikatne i wspierające bodźce, dzięki którym osoby grające wciąż mogą zaangażować

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[5] Ponieważ raport został opublikowany przez Daniela Cooka, dotychczas cytowany był jako „(Cook, 2018)". Po sugestii ze strony Samuela Poirier-Poulina, którego artykuł znajduje się w niniejszym numerze specjalnym, tekst ten będzie cytowany jako „(Short i in., 2018)", w celu podkreślenia zbiorczego charakteru pracy. Pozostali członkowie grupy to (w kolejności, w jakiej wymienieni są w raporcie): Tanya X Short, Anthony Ordon, Dan Hurd, Chelsea Howe, Jake Forbes, Squirrel Eiserloh, Joshua Diaz, Ron Meiners.

się w grę pomimo niższego stanu pobudzenia. Często w takich grach występuje intymna przestrzeń i emocje, jak również powolne tempo rozgrywki, a ich niewielki rozmiar ułatwia poznanie tych przestrzeni i emocji (w sensie przestrzeni, emocji itp.). Miękkie bodźce sugerują autentyczność, szczerość i człowieczeństwo".

(Short i in., 2018, podkreślenia oryginalne).

Posiłkując się powyższą definicją, Agata Waszkiewicz i Martyna Bakun (2020) przyglądają się przytulności jako cesze, która nie tylko może opisywać wybraną grupę gier, ale którą można odnaleźć również w skądinąd nieprzytulnych grach akcji. Ten związek przytulności z innymi trybami i estetykami rozgrywki opisują trzy główne rodzaje relacji: 1) spójność, 2) dysonans oraz 3) sytuacyjność.

Spójność jest najbardziej intuicyjnym rodzajem relacji, obecnym w większości gier przytulnych. Charakteryzuje sytuację, w której przytulna estetyka towarzyszy przytulnym przekazom lub motywom. Co warto podkreślić, w tej kategorii najważniejsza zdaje się przytulność rozgrywki – o ile część gier oczywiście posiada rozbudowaną, przytulną warstwę narracyjną, jak chociażby *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), którego ważnym aspektem jest możliwość wchodzenia w romantyczne relacje z innymi postaciami, o tyle inne tytuły przedkładają przytulność rozgrywki nad rozbudowaną warstwę fabularną. Ma to miejsce na przykład w *A Little to the Left* (Max Inferno, 2022), w którym zadaniem osoby grającej jest układanie i porządkowanie przedmiotów – takich jak śrubki, książki, czy liście – w estetyczny i satysfakcjonujący sposób.

Gdy przytulność jest w dysonansie z resztą gry, dochodzi do „połączenia dwóch estetyk, które pozornie wydają się ze sobą sprzeczne" (Waszkiewicz i Bakun, 2020, s. 233). Takie zestawienie może dotyczyć różnych elementów, aczkolwiek najczęściej przytulna rozgrywka i estetyka towarzyszą narracji o trudnych emocjach, a nie na odwrót. Wśród przykładów takiego dysonansu znajduje się *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), opisujące doświadczenie zmagania się z nieuleczalną chorobą własnego dziecka – gra utrzymana jest w jasnych, przyjemnych dla oka kolorach i miękkich kształtach.

Przytulność sytuacyjna cechuje natomiast momenty, w których uczucie przytulności ujawnia się w grach nieprzytulnych, oferując moment wytchnienia od walk i elementów akcji. Często taki przytulny przerywnik jest uzyskiwany „poprzez wprowadzenie motywu ogniska, które w wielu grach służy jako miejsce zapisu gry i bezpieczne schronienie" (Waszkiewicz i Bakun, 2020, s. 235). Takie zabiegi ludyczne widoczne są na przykład w wysokobudżetowych grach *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011) czy *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013), w których właśnie ognisko wyznacza bezpieczną ludycznie przystań.

Podobny efekt może zostać uzyskany w przerywnikach filmowych i w warstwie narracyjnej, jak ma to miejsce chociażby w *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (Naughty

Dog, 2016), gdy Nathan Drake i Elena spędzają wspólnie spokojny wieczór przy kolacji i grach. Jest to istotny moment w tytule, który w sposób typowy dla przygodowych gier akcji rzuca osobę grającą w intensywną akcję, wymagającą opanowania pewnych umiejętności w celu pokonania długich fal nadciągających przeciwników. Moment ten jest dodatkowo znaczący, gdyż właśnie doświadczenie tej przytulnej przerwy pozwala odpocząć zarówno osobie grającej, jak i jej postaci, ostatecznie zbliżając je do siebie.

Odpoczynek jako forma oporu

Niedaleko od opieki i przytulności znajduje się też pojęcie troski. Omawiając praktyki streamingu, Jordan Youngblood definiuje *przytulną troskę* (ang. *cozy wholesomeness*) jako sposób na „przyjęcie tego potencjału jedności i intymności i połączenie go z oporną postawą bycia, która pozwala na coś innego niż cynizm i sarkazm" (Youngblood, 2021, s. 533). Za Mel Campbell troskę (*wholesomeness*) można zaś zdefiniować jako ideę niemal radykalnego optymizmu i jedności, która opiera się ironii i przeciwstawia się „kulturze zdominowanej przez samotność, cynizm i pozowanie nad kapitałem kulturowym" (Campbell, 2018). Z kolei dla Judith Philips troska może oznaczać kilka rzeczy, w tym „uczucie, miłość, obowiązek, dobre samopoczucie, odpowiedzialność i wzajemność", które z kolei przejawiać się mogą poprzez „dotyk, działanie, emocje i ekspresję cielesną" (Philips, 2007, s. 1).

Choć rozmawiając o trosce, w pierwszej kolejności myślimy o kontekście relacji międzyludzkich – tak, jak robi to Philips – jest to również istotne pojęcie w sferze dyskursów politycznych oraz filozoficznych. Na przykład utworzona przez Carol Gilligan i Nel Noddings feministyczna koncepcja etyki troski (ang. *Ethics of Care* – Hamington, 2004; Held, 2006; Robinson, 1999) „próbowała rzucić wyzwanie koncepcjom etyki opartym na sprawiedliwości i prawie, przeciwstawiając im etykę opartą na wartościach kluczowych dla ludzkich praktyk wzajemnej troski" (Thompson, 2015, s. 433). Z filozoficznego, ale też polityczno-społecznego punktu widzenia troska jest zawsze uwikłana politycznie, biorąc pod uwagę, że historycznie troska oraz ogólnie pojęta opiekuńczość miała być domeną kobiet oraz cechą kojarzoną z kobiecością (Thompson, 2015).

Myśl, że troska, powinność i uroczość mogą być politycznymi narzędziami oporu i aktywizmu. nie jest nowa w dyskursach feministycznych, krytycznych czy aktywistycznych. Po raz pierwszy perspektywa ta została zaproponowana w 1988 roku przez Czarną feministkę i queerową poetkę Audre Lorde, która w trakcie swojej walki z rakiem napisała: „Dbanie o siebie to nie jest dogadzanie sobie, to strategia przetrwania, a to z kolei jest aktem politycznej walki" (Lorde, 1988, s. 131). Od tego momentu *samodbanie* (ang. *self-care*) zyskało istotną rolę w tekstach innych Czarnych osób autorskich, chociaż koncept ten – jak zauważył André Spicer

(2019) – stracił swoje radykalne i feministyczne znaczenie poprzez jego (nad)użycie w popularnych dyskursach. Przykładowo, Sundus Abdul Hadi krytykuje pojęcie *samodbania*, podkreślając, że chociaż jest ono zwykle najbardziej potrzebne osobom doświadczającym marginalizacji ze względu na rasę czy płeć, osób tych często nie stać na skomercjalizowane usługi związane z *samodbaniem* (2017).

Na koniec warto wspomnieć o tym, jak o *samodbaniu* pisze Tricia Hersey, autorka manifestu *Rest is Resistance* i założycielka projektu The Nap Ministry, według której „odpoczynek jest formą oporu, ponieważ zakłóca działanie kapitalizmu i białej supremacji oraz opiera się im" (Hersey, 2022). Autorka podkreśla tym samym sposób, w jaki kontrola snu i czasu odpoczynku staje się często formą przemocy symbolicznej stosowanej wobec osób niebiałych w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Na swojej stronie internetowej Hersey opisuje „wyzwalającą moc odpoczynku" i dodaje, że „częścią oporu w zakresie odpoczynku jest także odzyskanie wyobraźni i nadziei, odzyskanie intuicji pozwalającej wiedzieć, co jest właściwe, oraz świadomości, że zawsze jest czas, aby przejąć swoje własne ciało i ponownie uczynić je swoim własnym" (Hersey, 2020).

Jak przytulne gry wpisują się w narracje o odpoczynku rozumianym w kategoriach oporu? Biorąc pod uwagę historię ich powstania jako alternatywy dla brutalnych, szybkich i opartych na rywalizacji grach głównego nurtu, trudno nie postrzegać przytulnych gier jako zwierciadła, w którym odbijają się dotąd niezaspokojone potrzeby osób grających. W zmieniającym się, niestabilnym krajobrazie politycznym i gospodarczym ostatnich lat widać wyraźny zwrot w stronę prawicowych i przyzwalających na nietolerancję idei. Również kryzysy wynikające z wybuchu wojny w Ukrainie czy długotrwałej pandemii COVID-19, a także zbliżające się zagrożenie katastrofą klimatyczną, w wyraźny sposób zmieniły naszą relację z rozrywką, w której zaczynamy poszukiwać chwili wytchnienia od codziennych zmartwień i problemów. W tym kontekście warto przywołać pojęcie *gry regeneracyjnej* zaproponowane przez Gerarda Farcę, Alexandera Lehnera i Víctora Navarro-Remesala, którzy zwracają uwagę na istotność gier przytulnych z tego powodu, że potrafią wywoływać uczucia takie jak przywiązanie, ciekawość i zaangażowanie, nie tylko oferując osobom grającym przestrzeń do odpoczynku, ale także zachęcając je do zwracania uwagi na środowisko naturalne poza kontekstem gry, przez co „zmieniają ich nawykowe usposobienie oraz obraz natury, kultury i ich wzajemnych zależności" (Farca, Lehner, Navarro-Remesal, 2018, s. 22). W momencie gdy dominujący w przestrzeni publicznej dyskurs chętnie obarcza jednostki odpowiedzialnością za zmiany klimatyczne, zamiast pociągać do odpowiedzialności firmy odpowiedzialne za wysoką emisję zanieczyszczeń, fantazja odgrywania roli samotnego bohatera ratującego świat przestaje być tak atrakcyjna. Nic zatem dziwnego, że tak wiele osób szuka ukojenia i pocieszenia w przewidywalności i stabilności, którą często niosą ze sobą gry przytulne.

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Samuel Poirier-Poulin*

"Drown Your Troubles in Coffee": Place, Heterotopia, and Immersion in the *Coffee Talk* Series

Abstract

This article contributes to the growing body of research on space, place, and immersion in video games and offers an analysis of placeness in *Coffee Talk* (Toge Productions, 2020) and *Coffee Talk Episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly* (Toge Productions, 2023). Building on the work of Michel Foucault (1967/2008), this article begins by analyzing the coffee shop of this series as a heterotopia that allows the game characters and the player to find a form of comfort. Then, it examines the series in light of theories of immersion and pays particular attention to the place where the author played the two games – his bed – and also describes it as a heterotopia. This paper shows the usefulness of Foucault's concept of heterotopia to understand placeness and coziness in video games, and the relevance of taking into account the physical space of play when we conduct a textual analysis.

Keywords: place, space, heterotopia, immersion, cozy games, bed, textual analysis, *Coffee Talk*

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Introduction

The distinction between space and place has been the source of fruitful discussions in human geography since the 1970s. In his foundational book *Place: An Introduction*, Tim Cresswell (2015) defines places as "spaces which people have made meaningful . . . [and] are attached to in one way or another" (p. 12). For Cresswell, place is more concrete than space. "When we speak of space we tend to think of outer-space or the spaces of geometry," he writes. "Spaces have areas and volumes. Places have space between them" (Cresswell, 2015, p. 15). Nevertheless, space and place are not mutually exclusive – a location can be both a space for someone and a place for someone else – and the relationship between the two is fluid. Cresswell draws on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), who explains that a space can become a place as we familiarize ourselves with it and imbue it with value (p. 6). The concepts of space and place truly take on their full meaning when compared to each other: "From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa" (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). Cresswell also builds on the work of John Agnew (1987, p. 28), who notes that three criteria are essential to the creation of a place: (1) a location, identifiable through geographical coordinates; (2) a locale, i.e., the physical, material setting of the space, its concrete form (defined by walls, windows, and a door in the case of a room); and (3) a sense of place, i.e., the subjective and affective attachment to a certain place and the feeling of knowing what it is like to be in this place (Cresswell, 2015, pp. 12–14).

In game studies, the notion of space has gained considerable attention since the early 2000s and has notably been explored through the lens of design and architecture (Nitsche, 2008; Totten, 2014; Wolf, 2001), storytelling (Domsch, 2019; Jenkins, 2004), gender studies, domestic labour, and domestic culture (Flynn, 2003; Harvey, 2015; Nooney, 2013), postcolonial studies (Breger, 2008; Mukherjee, 2015; Murray, 2017), and queer theory (Ruberg, 2020; Yu, 2023). In contrast, research with an emphasis on the notion of place is fairly recent. Christopher Goetz (2012) has analyzed the tether fantasy in *Terraria* (Re-Logic, 2011) and *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), arguing that the player experiences pleasure from exploring new and hostile spaces, and then returning to a safe place – their home base – where they can withdraw from danger. Along the same lines, Daniel Vella (2019) has written about feelings of dwelling and being-at-home in *Minecraft* and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo EAD, 2012), two games that allow the player to build their own "place" and that emphasize the binary opposition "inside/outside." Jessica Robinson and Nicholas Bowman (2022) have examined how players experience *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019), a version of *World of Warcraft* that recreates the game as it was in 2006 (with some minor modifications). They have found that social experiences, notably the sense of belonging to a community, contribute to feelings of nostalgia and a sense of place in the world of Azeroth. Lastly, Andrea

Andiloro (2022) has examined how atmosphere contributes to a sense of place in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) through patterns of light, colour, texture, and sound, and through social interaction and movement. As he explains, "whenever we 'play a game' we are not just engaging in a ludic activity, we are also visiting and temporarily inhabiting places presenting an atmosphere synaesthetically perceived by the felt-body" (Andiloro, 2022, p. 219).

This article contributes to the growing body of research on space, place, and immersion in video games and offers an analysis of placeness in *Coffee Talk*, a series of visual novels developed by Indonesian independent studio Toge Productions. The series consists of two games – *Coffee Talk* (2020) and *Coffee Talk Episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly* (2023)[1] – that both put the player in the shoes of a barista who works in a coffee shop open in the evenings. The series is visually inspired by pixel art and anime from the 1990s, and incorporates slow, chillhop background music. The story is set in 2020 or 2023 (depending on the game) in a fantasy version of Seattle where humans, orcs, banshees, werewolves, and other creatures coexist. The story of each game takes place over the course of two weeks, and each day is presented as a vignette during which different characters come to Coffee Talk, the in-game coffee shop, to take a hot drink and chat (see Figure 1 and 2). The series addresses themes such as interracial relationships, war trauma and healing, the challenges of parenting, and the obstacles faced by creative workers. Interestingly, Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) observes that place and narrative are inherently connected. She argues that locations gain their status of place through the stories people tell about them, which allow us to develop affective connections with these locations and distinguish them from their surrounding space (p. 86). The simple fact that *Coffee Talk* tells the story of a coffee shop and its customers contributes greatly to making Coffee Talk a place for the player. In addition, the use of a proper name to refer to this location is a strong way to create a sense of place (Ryan, 2015, p. 89).

Coffee Talk 1 and *2* are described as "talking simulators" on their respective Steam pages (n.d.), but it would be more accurate to describe these games as "listening simulators"[2] since the player character does not speak much and the player spends most of the game listening to the daily conversations of a few regular customers, who sit at the counter near the barista. In addition, unlike many other visual novels, the games do not contain dialogue trees, and the player never needs to choose their character's answer or action from a series of options. Although *Coffee Talk 1* and *2*

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[1]   To avoid confusion between the name of the series and the name of each game, I will write *Coffee Talk* to refer to the entire series, and *Coffee Talk 1* and *Coffee Talk 2* to respectively refer to the first and second games. I will write Coffee Talk (without italics) to refer to the in-game coffee shop.

[2]   I owe this term to Carl Therrien, who used it in his graduate seminar on cinema, video games, and interactive fiction (JEU6002) in the winter of 2022 to describe *Coffee Talk 1*.

are primarily text-based games, the player must sometimes prepare hot drinks for the customers by combining three ingredients. Serving the right drink to a character based on their order or their mood slightly influences the conversations and the character's story arc and allows the player to unlock different endings. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are available on PC, home consoles, and handheld consoles, but for this paper, I will draw specifically on my gaming experience on the Nintendo Switch.

Figure 1–2. The coffee shop of *Coffee Talk*. Top picture: Myrtle (left) and Aqua (right) in *Coffee Talk 1*.
Bottom picture: Lucas (left), Jorji (middle), and Hyde (right) in *Coffee Talk 2*.
Screenshots by the author.

Building on the work of Michel Foucault (1967/2008), this article begins by analyzing the coffee shop of *Coffee Talk* as a heterotopia (a concept I define below) that allows the game characters and the player to find a form of comfort. Then, it examines the series in light of theories of immersion and pays particular attention to the place where I played the two games – my bed – and also describes it as a heterotopia. I finally conclude by briefly highlighting how *Coffee Talk* encourages us to think about alternative ways of designing video games and how it can be used for self-care. This paper ultimately shows the usefulness of Foucault's concept of heterotopia to understand placeness and coziness in video games, and the relevance of taking into account the physical space of play when we conduct a textual analysis. Throughout this article, I keep in mind the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1986), who sees reading as "a transactional process that goes on between a particular reader and a particular text at a particular time, and under particular circumstances" (p. 123). I believe that a similar remark could be made about gaming and the importance of taking into consideration the circumstances surrounding play.

Coffee Talk as a heterotopic place

In his text "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault (1967/2008) defines heterotopias as concrete places that foster imagination and are separated from other places and spaces. Heterotopias are sites "that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations designated, mirrored, or reflected by them" (pp. 16–17). For Foucault, heterotopias are places that are part of society, but which are also "a sort of counter-emplacements," "a kind of places that are outside of all places, even though they are actually localizable" (p. 17). Heterotopias differ from utopias, which are idealized versions of society, "emplacements with no real place," but Foucault specifies that heterotopias can be seen as "a sort of effectively realized utopias" (p. 17). For him, heterotopias are places like the cemetery, the psychiatric hospital, the prison, the garden, the museum, the library, and the ship. Heterotopias are therefore real approximations of utopias, or parallel places where we put individuals who are socially perceived as undesirable in order to make utopia possible in the rest of society.

Since the publication of Foucault's (1967/2008) text, a few researchers have examined the café and the coffeehouse as heterotopias. Enrico Bolzoni (2013), for example, has analyzed the café in the works of Patrick Modiano and Guy Debord as "a counter-site in the ultra-organized space of contemporary Paris, a discontinuous and subversive, but socially defined, spatiality" (pp. 140–141). According to him, Modiano and Debord's works encourage contemporary readers and spectators to become aware of the emptiness and devalued image of modern cafés and to realize

that new places with roles closer to the historical roles of cafés must be created. Kevin Hetherington (1997, pp. 14–15) and Uğur Kömeçoğlu (2005) have respectively described the coffeehouses of the Palais-Royal in late 18th-century France and 16th- and 17th-century Istanbul as heterotopias because of their multiple functions: they were notably a place for reading, gambling, prostitution, theatre, and for talking about politics. Hetherington and Kömeçoğlu's analyses are in line with the idea that certain places are heterotopic because of their heterogeneity and their "power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1967/2008, p. 19).

In their analysis of *Coffee Talk 1*, Agata Waszkiewicz (2022) briefly mentions that the game's coffee shop could be seen as a "third place"[3] (p. 97), a concept proposed by Ray Oldenburg (1999), to describe social environments that are distinct from the home (the first place) and from the workplace (the second place). According to Oldenburg, third places are "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" (p. 16). While this idea is representative of the experience of Coffee Talk, the work of Foucault (1967/2008) allows me to push this reflection further and to show that Coffee Talk is a particular third place: a third place that is heterotopic. Coffee Talk is introduced to the player as a unique place within a bustling Seattle. Each game begins with a prologue that highlights the contradictory feelings the city evokes – a mix of dreams, loneliness, and disillusion:

> Seattle – 2020 / A city filled with dreams and madness. / A time when the great war between races is but a footnote in history. / A time when anyone can dream of being whatever they want to be… / And have those dreams crushed before they can even be discussed. / But still, it is a place and time where anything can happen (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2020).
> Seattle – 2023 / A city of enduring loneliness. / A place where the dreamers, the realists, and the weary… / … are striving to thrive, and not just to survive. / It is a time when society is reevaluating what it means to be alive. / It is a moment when history is questioned and traditions are challenged (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2023).

Each prologue ends by highlighting the importance of Coffee Talk – the comfort it provides to its customers, which contrasts with the harshness of Seattle, and the fact that it is a place conducive to conversations:

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[3]   Waszkiewicz (2022) uses the term "third space" rather than "third place," but their definition corresponds to Oldenburg's (1999) concept of the third place.

> In one corner of the city stands a coffee shop. / A place that is only open when the sun is sleeping. / A place where people share their stories (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2020).
>
> As some look for answers off the beaten path… / Seeking bittersweet comforts to help pass on lonely nights. / In a night-blooming coffee shop standing between the rainy streets… / They'd find a small respite, through a cup of warm drink (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2023).

Coffee Talk is a warm place that contrasts with the outside world (visible in the game through three windows) where it is constantly raining. From inside the coffee shop, the player sees eerie silhouettes walking down the street nearby. The hostile nature of the outside world is reinforced by the daily news that appears on the front page of the *Evening Whispers*, the local newspaper. The news notably talks about job loss, racial profiling in the workplace, illegal drug sale, digital data leakage, and a zombie infection. As Tuan (1977) explains, the space outside a place influences the meaning of that place: the unsettling nature of space allows us to better appreciate the security of a place (p. 6). This is something the game characters also emphasize. In the second game, for example, Gala tells the other customers: "I wish we lived in a world where everyone had that… / A place to be safe while the rain falls outside," and Baileys later says: "You know, being like this, all together, when it's dark and damp… / And feeling good and safe… and home… / It's a pretty rare feeling in a kinda-public place" (Toge Productions, 2023).

Coffee Talk appears as a refuge that allows the game characters to temporarily escape an uncertain future, or at least, to make it more bearable. It allows them to find a home within chaos and to find stability. The series emphasizes the consumption of hot drinks (coffee, tea, herbal tea, hot chocolate, and hot milk) and the comfort they provide. Some drinks also remind the characters of good memories or trips they went on and evoke nostalgia: "The taste is… really authentic. / Just like the Teh Tarik you get in South East Asia" (Myrtle; Toge Productions, 2020). For short story writer Freya, Coffee Talk is a calm and inspiring place where she can work on her debut novel. It is thus a place that brings her closer to her dream of publishing her first book. Although Coffee Talk is a fictional place, it could be associated with the third wave of coffee culture, which started in the early 2000s and is characterized by the increase popularity of independent cafés in opposition to chains like Starbucks (Gold, 2008). As Waszkiewicz (2022) explains, "these independent cafés emphasize the intimate atmosphere . . . [and] the personal relationship between the customer and the barista, prioritizing the experience of drinking coffee (its taste, smell, and texture) over the impersonal character of the chain restaurants" (pp. 89–90). Places like Coffee Talk create a heterotopic intimacy, i.e., a form of intimacy that is made possible by the existence of heterotopic places.

On a genre level, *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* correspond to Tanya X. Short et al.'s (2018) definition of "cozy games," i.e., games that are soothing and comforting for the player, allow them to relax, and, I would add, can ease their transition to sleep (see also Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020). According to Short et al. (2018), cozy games evoke "the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness" (section 1, para. 1) through their aesthetic, narrative, and mechanics. Coffee Talk offers to its customers a soothing experience, and this experience extends to the player, who feels immersed in the game. The player can feel the warmth of the coffee shop, the heat of the customers' hot drinks, and relive certain sensations by drawing on their personal experiences. Certain sounds are particularly evocative, such as that of hot liquid pouring into a cup or the sound of a customer taking a sip of coffee or tea. The presence of aesthetically pleasing images to accompany these sounds makes them even more effective. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* also evoke softness through their chillhop background music, which invites the player to slow down and live in the moment. Finally, the fact that both games entirely take place in the same coffee shop gives the player time to familiarize themselves with it and gradually feel a sense of place. While the player might not feel "at home" as much as in their home base in *Minecraft* or *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (see Vella, 2019), they can still become attached to the coffee shop and know what it is like to virtually be in that place. This feeling is arguably even more present among players who have completed the first game and are now playing the second instalment. They get the impression of being once more in a place that was already familiar to them.

Coffee Talk therefore appears as a heterotopia partly because of its ambience that positions it as a counter-site where it is good to be. Each time a character enters or leaves the coffee shop, the player hears the ring of a bell, which delimits this place and separates it from the outside world. In their analysis of the first game of the series, Waszkiewicz (2022) notes that Coffee Talk differs from both traditional coffee shops, which are open during the day, and from bars and pubs, which sell alcoholic beverages (p. 93); Coffee Talk is thus positioned as an "other space," to use Foucault's (1967/2008) term. I would add that bars and pubs are generally noisy places where it can be difficult to have a conversation. Coffee Talk contrasts with such places and allows its customers to discuss, and above all, to feel listened to. Aqua, a shy researcher who works on her first video game, meets Myrtle, a game designer who advises her and becomes her friend (and possibly her love interest), while Riona realizes after talking with a few customers that she must overcome her fear of being rejected and take a chance if she ever wants to become an opera singer. Many turn to their screen to feel connected and cope with loneliness, as the prologue of *Coffee Talk 2* indicates, but the characters of the series still choose to go to the eponymous coffee shop. Their mobile phones are usually on the counter next to them, as if to indicate that despite the ubiquity of technology and social

media, they are interested in in-person contact. During a conversation with Silver (Neil), an alien who tries to understand how social interactions work on Earth, Myrtle suggests to him: "Start listening the way we listen… / Which, essentially, is *not* really listening at all" (Toge Productions, 2020, emphasis in the original). The social interactions that take place in Coffee Talk contrast with this description of society: the characters listen to each other and develop genuine relationships. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are also an opportunity for players to meet endearing fictional characters and get to know them. Days go by and the player does not know which character will come to the coffee shop (unless they have already completed the games), always creating a pleasant surprise and a small joy when a beloved character shows up. Listening to the game characters and preparing the drinks they order become a sort of comforting ritual, especially for players who play the game every evening, little by little, (half) an hour at a time (like I did).

Interestingly, Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020) mention that cozy games can evoke security by providing inclusive spaces, and this is what *Coffee Talk* does. The series' coffee shop is a safe place that allows marginalized people to let their guard down, open up about their lives, talk about social injustices, and simply exist without being harassed. Coffee Talk is notably an inclusive place for Silver and Amanda, two clumsy aliens who try to adapt to the customs of planet Earth and with whom the customers of Coffee Talk are patient and understanding. It is also an inclusive place for Lua and Baileys, a succubus and an elf who are in a relationship but face racism from Baileys' parents, who consider succubi as an inferior race. In the second game, Baileys even evokes the notion of "chosen family," a term traditionally used by queer folks to describe alternative families that encompass friends, lovers, co-parents, and (adoptive) children and are "organized through ideologies of love, choice, and creation" in contrast with biological or blood families (Weston, 1991/1997, p. 27). When asked by the barista about him and Lua's wedding, Baileys ends up mentioning who will be invited and says: "Just us and our closest family members… / Whether we got them at birth or chose them ourselves" (Toge Productions, 2023). Baileys then invites Silver and Amanda and mentions the "Cafe family" (see Figure 3), highlighting how the series' coffee shop allows the characters to develop special bonds that go beyond biological ties. Although the series does not feature any explicitly queer characters, it still contains a queer subtext: Hyde and Gala, two long-time friends, sometimes seem to flirt, whereas Myrtle and Aqua, two characters with opposite personalities, begin to see each other outside the coffee shop. The safe nature of Coffee Talk is, however, challenged when a xenophobic inspector visits the coffee shop and starts asking questions to the customers and the barista about the presence of illegal alien immigrants – Silver and Amanda. Unsurprisingly, all of them refuse to give

him information and help Silver (*Coffee Talk 1*) and later Amanda (*Coffee Talk 2*) to hide. In *Coffee Talk 2*, Lua bluntly responds to the inspector:

> You have no jurisdiction to come here and act like a big shot / I've never seen anyone in this café who doesn't belong here! / So I suggest you take your suspicions elsewhere… / . . . / I can feel myself getting angry, Mr. Agent. / And trust me… / You do NOT want to see me angry! (Toge Productions, 2023)

Lua's message is clear: Coffee Talk is a place where everyone is welcome, except those who make discriminatory comments.[4]

Figure 3. Baileys (left) is inviting Silver (middle) and Amanda (right) to his wedding in *Coffee Talk 2*. Screenshot by the author.

In short, Coffee Talk can be seen as a heterotopia of compensation, a term originally used by Foucault (1967/2008) to talk about a "real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly, ill constructed and sketchy" (p. 21). While Coffee Talk is not a perfect place, it is still more peaceful than the rest of Seattle. Social interactions are valued and the few conflicts that arise are

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[4]   The xenophobic comments of the inspector are also at times reminiscent of a transphobic discourse: "Aliens who try to pass for Earthlings are a bigger problem. / . . . / For one, it just muddles things. No matter how much they try to look like Earthlings . . . / They were born aliens, and aliens they will remain. / But now they're aliens who don't look like aliens. / What does that mean, you know? And where does it stop? / What if some Earthlings decided they wanted to look like aliens? / That would be a huge mess" (Agent, *Coffee Talk 2*).

ephemeral and ultimately allow the characters to better understand each other and gain emotional maturity. This place makes more visible the problems of the outside world, whether it is social precarity or racial tensions, and highlights the absurdity of these tensions: if the customers of Coffee Talk can all coexist and help each other, why are people in the outside world not able to do so? Although heterotopias are grounded in the real world (unlike utopias), they reveal possibilities that are sometimes hard to imagine in everyday life, and this is what Coffee Talk does for its customers – and by extension, for the player. It is also worth mentioning that Coffee Talk exists in the series' fictional universe but that Lucas, a regular customer in the second game, is unable to locate it on his mobile phone. This highlights the utopian nature of this place. In the next section, I continue my analysis of place and heterotopia by turning to theories of immersion, which, as we will see, offer several research avenues that complement those I have previously discussed.

The immersive experience of *Coffee Talk*

Questions of space and place in game studies have notably been explored through theories of immersion. As many authors point out, video games can generate immersive moments during which the player has the sensation of leaving their current location and integrating the space of the game (e.g., Brown & Cairns, 2004; Calleja, 2011; Murray, 1997/2017; Trépanier-Jobin & Couturier, 2018). Bob Witmer and Michael Singer (1998) describe immersion as "a psychological state characterized by perceiving oneself to be enveloped by, included in, and interacting with an environment that provides a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences" (p. 227). In her work on literature and electronic media, Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) offers a conceptualization of immersion in relation to the possible worlds theory. She sees fiction as a form of virtual reality experience and describes it as a "space-travel vehicle" through which the reader's consciousness is transported into a nonactual possible world (Ryan, 2015, p. 73). Gordon Calleja (2011), on the other hand, prefers the term "incorporation" rather than "immersion" and uses it to refer to a double phenomenon:

> the player incorporates (in the sense of internalizing or assimilating) the game environment into consciousness while simultaneously being incorporated through the avatar into that environment. The simultaneous occurrence of these two processes is a necessary condition for the experience of incorporation. Put in another way, incorporation occurs when the game world is present to the player while the player is simultaneously present, via her avatar, to the virtual environment (p. 169, emphasis in the original).

For Calleja, incorporation occurs when the player has the feeling of inhabiting the space, of being present in the game environment through their avatar. It occurs when the game generates different types of engagement (spatial, narrative, affective, etc.; Calleja, 2011).

My immersive experience with *Coffee Talk* is intimately related to the platform on which I played this series: the Nintendo Switch in handheld mode. In his book *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, Geoff King (2000) explains that movie theatres which screen Hollywood blockbusters use specific immersive strategies:

> Big widescreen cinema claims to fill the viewer's vision. Multichannel hi-fi sound . . . adds significantly to the impression of immersion in a three-dimensional experience. Viewers are assaulted by a brand of spectacle that might amount to sheer pace and kinetics; to loudness that can be felt as bodily vibration, and brightness that makes the eyes contract. . . . The viewer is sold the illusion of being transported into the world on-screen, of experiencing more directly the moments (p. 33, emphasis in the original).

The Nintendo Switch in its handheld mode uses immersive strategies that are quite different: the screen is smaller (although it is larger than that of the Game Boy Color or the Nintendo DS), and for this reason, the player brings the image closer to them, as one would do with a book, creating a more intimate experience with the console.[5] The sound is not particularly loud, but the player can hear it well due to their proximity to the console. The player can also easily carry the console to a place that favours their immersion and chose a posture that suits them (they can sit, lie on their back, or lie on their stomach). The device is in appearance less impressive than the movie theatres described by King (2000), but I feel just as much (or even more) transported into the world of Coffee Talk as when I go to the theatre. I feel the game's ambience entering my room and making it cozier. This immersive feeling is reinforced by the proximity of the screen, which places the player and the characters on the same level; the feeling of maintained eye contact gives the player the impression of speaking directly to the characters. In addition, due to the game's first-person point of view, the player character is never visible onscreen and takes up little space in the story; it is an empty shell on which the player can project themselves.

Following Calleja's (2011) typology, several types of involvement are present in *Coffee Talk 1* and *2*. Both games are predominantly story-driven and rely entirely

[5]   I even caught myself bringing the screen of my Nintendo Switch closer to my face and inhaling to smell it as I would do with the pages of a book.

on interactions with fictional characters, and for this reason, narrative and shared involvement is central to the game experience.[6] Affective involvement is also present, mainly through the sense of attachment the player develops to certain characters and the player's affective response to specific events or dialogues (the funny way Silver and Amanda express themselves, for example, or certain injustices the game denounces). Calleja's model does not take specifically into account sensory involvement,[7] but this form of involvement is present in *Coffee Talk*, notably through ambient music, environmental sounds, warm colours, and hot drinks that evoke comfort and softness. Three other types of involvement are less present in the series. Ludic involvement, which concerns the player's choices and the impact of these choices in the game, is rather weak: *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are very linear, and the player never explicitly has to make any decisions. However, the drinks they prepare can influence the story arc of some characters. Kinesthetic involvement, which is based on the internalization of the game controls, is almost absent since the game mainly consists in pressing a single button in order to display the text one or two sentences at a time. Lastly, spatial involvement, which concerns the navigation, exploration, and familiarization with the game space, is not present since the player cannot move and explore the environment. In fact, if the player has the impression of being present in Coffee Talk, of inhabiting the place and knowing the coffee shop, it is essentially due to the other types of involvement the game puts forward: narrative, shared, affective, and sensory involvement. It is through these types of involvement that, in Ryan's (2015) terms, the player's consciousness relocates itself in Coffee Talk and "reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality" – a move she calls "recentering" (p. 73).

In their work on immersion, Dominic Arsenault and Martin Picard (2008) argue that it is easier for players to feel immersed in a familiar universe: "a universe already known by the player will favour immersion because it is easier to 'feel comfortable' and identify with a world if it is based on a known personal experience" (p. 12, my translation). The authors mostly refer to game universes that players are already familiar with because of their previous experiences with a game franchise, but I would stress that this idea of familiarity also applies to games that seek to reproduce mundane activities. This observation is particularly interesting when applied to a series like *Coffee Talk*, which takes place in a rather modest coffee shop and centres on an activity that many players have already experienced: chatting around a hot beverage. It is easier

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[6]   According to Calleja's (2011) model, shared involvement depends on the player's interaction with other agents in the game (human- or computer-controlled).

[7]   Calleja (2011) seems to include it as part of affective involvement. He notes in his chapter on this topic that "the evocative power of graphics and sound should not be discounted" (p. 140), but his analysis of sensory involvement is quite limited.

in such circumstances to feel sensations and to be "moved" by what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls "ordinary affects," i.e., by those ordinary encounters and rhythms "that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences" (p. 2). *Coffee Talk* interestingly shows that slowness can be immersive. Following Tuan (1977), who describes place as "a pause in movement" (p. 138), I would argue that slowness allows the coffee shop of *Coffee Talk* to become a place and makes it possible for the player to "feel" this place – to feel the intensities and slight shudders "passing through and between everyday spaces and bodies" (Nautiyal, 2016, p. 100). On the other hand, Calleja (2011) explains that the player builds a cognitive map of the game environment, and as their map improves, their relationship with this environment changes: the player becomes more comfortable and develops a sense of belonging to the environment (p. 87). This process of internalization of space leads the player to see the game environment as part of their immediate surroundings and to perceive certain environments as places, and not only as spaces (Calleja, 2011, p. 87). The fact that the entirety of *Coffee Talk* is set in the same place and that this place is always presented to the player through the same series of images – the player briefly sees the coffee shop from the outside at the beginning of each day and then mostly from inside[8] – allows the player to develop a sense of place relatively quickly and to share this feeling with the game characters.

The images in *Coffee Talk* are located in the sense that they show a place – the titular coffee shop – and it could be tempting to believe that these images remain the same regardless of where the player plays the game; however, this is not entirely true. The images stay the same in that they do not change, but their impact on the player changes depending on the player's location. Unlike a fresco integrated into the architecture or a monument in the public space, the images of *Coffee Talk* go where the player carries their Nintendo Switch: in a certain way, they are delocated and then relocated where the player goes. As Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson (2020) explain, our experiences with video games (and with other media) are not only digital, but also material: they are "interwoven in the messy construction and experience of space, place, knowing, and being in the contemporary world" (p. 15). Play in the domestic space more specifically influences our routines and relationships to places; it amplifies the affective spaces of the house and becomes integrated into its atmosphere (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020, pp. 38, 42–43). Play becomes associated with these spaces and the ordinary affects they evoke, and these associations stay in our memory – they influence how we then orient ourselves toward these spaces. As Sara

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[8]   The camera is sometimes more to the left or to the right depending on the number of customers in the coffee shop and where they sit, but the image remains essentially the same.

Ahmed (2006) explains, orientation of bodies is not casual or originary, but acquired "through the repetitions of some actions over others" (p. 58). Almost two decades before the work of Hjorth and Richardson, Bernadette Flynn (2003) encouraged researchers to reframe how they conceptualized the impact of video game consoles on the home. She proposed the concept of the "digital hearth" to describe how gaming and changing consumption habits had transformed the meaning of the home, with the living room becoming a site of collective engagement centred on the console. Flynn observed at the time that this change reflected the transition from public to private forms of entertainment. For Samuel Tobin (2013), who worked on the Nintendo DS, the various rooms in the house influence the game in different ways (p. 65). The author notably analyzes the bedroom and talks about the different challenges it poses compared to the living room (p. 77). According to him,

> The smaller size of the room, the dominance of the bed, the more constrained floor plan, and the more narrow range of activities usually pursued in the bedroom compared to the living room require more negotiation and redefinition of space for game play on either a console or hand-held system (Tobin, 2013, p. 77).

With that in mind, I would like to briefly analyze in the remainder of this paper the place where I played *Coffee Talk* and that favoured my immersion: my bed (see Figure 4). I am aware that describing my bed as a place might seem a little odd, but I am drawing here on the work of Cresswell (2015), who invites us to see place as "a way of understanding the world" (p. 18). He writes:

> Most often the designation of place is given to something quite small in scale, but not too small. Neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities are easily referred to as places and these are the kinds of places that most often appear in writing on place. There is little writing on the corner of a favorite room as place at one scale, or on the globe at another. Yet, as Tuan suggested, there is something of place in all of these…
> …When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience (Cresswell, 2014, p. 18).

Figure 4. The author's bed.

This is how I see my bed: as a place I am attached to and that gives me access to different experiences, whether it is through dreams, reading, or video games. I would even say that my bed is a heterotopia in that it is delimited from the rest of my room. It is an idealized place that allows me to rest and in which I only slide into at a specific moment of the day: in the evening, when it is time to sleep (or a little before, if I plan to play on my Nintendo Switch). I cannot go inside my bed as I want: I first need to put on my pyjamas and brush my teeth; I need to "submit to rites and to purifications," to borrow Foucault's terms (1967/2008, p. 21). It is therefore a place that implies "a system of opening and closing that both isolates [it] and makes [it] penetrable" (p. 21). My bed also allows for the juxtaposition of several seemingly incompatible spaces or places: that of dreams and reality (wakefulness), but also that of reality (my bed) and video games (the coffee shop). Going back to Ahmed (2006), I would highlight that my perception of my bed as a heterotopia and the feeling of coziness my bed evokes is influenced by habits, repetitions, and orientations. Although *Coffee Talk* is a relaxing series on its own, the cozy place where I played this series and how I oriented myself toward that place and toward various objects within that place made *Coffee Talk* even more soothing and contributed to my feeling of immersion in the fictional coffee shop.

The comfort of my bed, the fact that I played the games under my covers, lying on my stomach or on my side, the head on my pillow, with my stuff animals and my dressing gown by my side, complemented the ambience of *Coffee Talk* and accentuated its comforting nature. Short et al. (2018) remind us that feelings of coziness depend not only on the game but also on the player and their state of mind. I would add here that the player's environment is also an important factor; the question of space and place is thus present even before immersion begins. In this context, the bed could be seen as a heterotopia that allows for cozy play and could be put in parallel with Johan Huizinga's (1938/1949) concept of "play-ground." Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*:

> The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (p. 10).

Huizinga's definition recalls at times Foucault's heterotopia, and the various play-grounds Huizinga mentions could be seen as heterotopias that allow different forms of play. The bed would be one of them.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a reflection on place, heterotopia, and immersion in the *Coffee Talk* series. I first sought to demonstrate that the coffee shop in this series can be seen as a heterotopic place that is soothing and comforting for the game characters and the player thanks to its warm ambience and welcoming nature. Then, I have analyzed the different ways immersion takes place in *Coffee Talk* and the impact of the place where I played this series – my bed – on my immersive experience, a topic often overlooked in game studies.

I would like to conclude this paper by briefly highlighting two other research avenues that *Coffee Talk* allows us to explore, but that were beyond the scope of this paper. In her short piece "Slouching Toward Relevant Video Games," Brie Code (2017) encourages game designers to create games that centre on care and that seek to elicit "tend-and-befriend" rather than "fight-or-flight" responses. Along the same lines, Anthony Dungan (2020) has argued that game designers should seek to use verbs like "painting," "debating," "teaching," or "camping," rather than the same limited set of violent verbs like "shooting" and "punching." This would allow video games to better reflect the human experience in all its complexity, he writes. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are interesting cases to further reflect on these alternative ways

of designing games as their gameplay centres on the verb "listening." Secondly, I would highlight that *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* and other cozy games like *A YEAR OF SPRINGS* (npckc, 2021), *New Pokémon Snap* (Bandai Namco Studios, 2021), and *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021) can be used for self-care. I have been working on trauma-like gaming experiences for the past four years and I found myself increasingly playing cozy games, unconsciously seeking to take a break from the challenging topics I was working on (suicide, depression, loneliness, war, etc.). Playing games like *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* became for me a mitigation technique, making the experience of working on trauma games more bearable and helping me to find comfort before falling asleep. This is not really surprising considering previous research on games as modes of socialization, escapism, and self-care during difficult times, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Barr & Copeland-Steward, 2022; Homo Ludens, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2021), but it would be interesting to further explore this research avenue and see to what extent cozy games specifically can act as a form of self-care and therapy for people who are frequently exposed to disturbing topics (psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc.) and for trauma survivors.

Acknowledgements

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Bettina Bódi*

The Duality of Cozy Games: Cozy Agency, Neoliberalism, and Affect

Abstract

Cozy games can be thought of both as indoctrination into, and escapism from, anxieties caused by neoliberal ideology underpinning the late-capitalist apparatus championing productivity, progress, and quantifiable result generation. I draw on sociologist Anthony Giddens' notion of "ontological security" – which refers to our sense of stability and safety that we draw from continuous, and therefore reliable, predictable, unthreatening, and familiar sequences of events or activities happening in our everyday lives – and propose the concept of "cozy agency" to productively examine the aesthetics of games that are not characterized by a hypermasculine drive to successfully overcome challenges, nor by the inessentiality of player action typical of idle games. Research on lifestyle media, cuteness, and vegetal affect is put into dialogue to theorize the modalities of agency typical cozy game aesthetics can afford and constrain. Such an approach is in line with recent shifts in discourses of agency and interactivity in game studies, which criticize these two terms for being too binary, masculine, and not accommodating alternative forms of engagement with games, with recent scholarship on agency especially calling for a politicization of the term and a call to delve into the significance of meaningful empowerment to act in/with/on/through games.

Keywords: cozy games, agency, ontological security, lifestyle media, cuteness, neoliberalism, affect, vegetal turn

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Introduction

According to the Office of Communications in the UK, online gaming saw a big increase during the pandemic, with more than half of people aged 16 and above playing online or mobile games, and over 92% reporting that doing so helped with their mental health during the pandemic (Ofcom, 2021, p. 3). The Entertainment Software Association has also reported that today over two thirds of adults aged over 18 play videogames weekly (ESA, 2021). Admittedly this is a very Western-centric window into gaming habits. However, the recently published *Power of Play Report 2023* by The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment surveyed almost 13,000 people across 12 countries to conclude that globally, 71% of those surveyed play for stress relief, and 55% play to avoid isolation and loneliness, which are still well over half of those surveyed (UKIE, 2023). These statistics strongly suggest a shift: that videogames are increasingly relevant to contemporary life, not only for leisure, but also to help manage the progressively more stressful conditions of modern living. This potential in videogames to grant a sense of empowerment closely tied with positive affect became ever so visible during the pandemic, with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) taking central stage. Its impact cannot be understated, some conspiracy theories even speculating that Nintendo engineered the pandemic to increase console sales – also known as the "Nintendo did Covid-19" (LastWeekTonight, 2020). Reviewers and players both praised the game, with its relaxing and calming qualities often being mentioned. However, there was a less cheery competing narrative in the surrounding discourse, exemplified by this excerpt from a *Wired* journalist:

> I have spent my lockdown mining islands of tarantulas to pay for the construction of a Red Zen Bridge. It is lonely, terrifying work. When I'm not being bitten by wily spiders in the dead of night, I spend my days toiling in the fields: shaking trees, hitting rocks and fishing the seas clean. When I can afford the airfare, I travel to yet more islands and harvest them clean of every resource, filling my pockets until I can fill them no more. There is nothing but toil (Temperton 2020).

Overly dramatic tone aside, this quote captures the underbelly of Nintendo's pastoral fantasy succinctly: that happiness is intricately intertwined with the acquisition of capital, that said capital can be grown by exploiting natural resources, and, should one participate in the "Stalk Market", also deploying social networks to best profit on assets (i.e., "Turnips") whose value fluctuates. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is a textbook example of what has come to be called a "cozy game", as defined by Short et al. (2018) and introduced to game studies by Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020). So this begs the question, how can we make sense of this duality

in cozy games, that on the one hand they re(create) neoliberal systems, and on the other they offer escapism from them?

In answering this question I draw on sociologist Anthony Giddens' notion of "ontological security" (Giddens, 1984, 1991). I propose the concept of *cozy agency* to examine how this tension plays out in non-hegemonic forms of play, by putting research on lifestyle media, cuteness, and vegetal affect into dialogue. Such an approach is in line with recent shifts in discourses of agency and interactivity in game studies, which criticize these two terms the field them being too binary, masculine, and not accommodating alternative forms of engagement with games (Fizek, 2022; Jennings, 2019; Kagen, 2022; Keogh, 2018), with recent scholarship on agency especially calling for a politicisation of the term and a call to delve into the significance of meaningful empowerment to act in/with/on/through games (Chia & Ruffino, 2022). It is also following in the footsteps of recent efforts to consider agency through a sociological lens (Muriel & Crawford, 2020).

Towards the concept of cozy agency: Interactivity, agency, and coziness

There is a long history across disciplines to distinguish videogames from other media according to their interactivity, something which is, above all, a rhetorical move to establish cultural status against other, more prestigious media (Keogh, 2018, p. 171). Interactivity as a rhetorical construct is shaped by developer discourse, design aesthetics, and monetisation strategies (Consalvo & Paul, 2019), the reasons for which go back to the 19th century. A lack of women's rights pre-suffragettes and laws prescribing what are proper ways of being and moving through the world; a discomfort with purposelessness stemming from the (religiously coded) work ethic introduced by the industrial revolution; and videogames' roots in advances in computation in the military industry, among others, all contributed towards a particular understanding of what is considered a proper videogame: one characterized by performance, conflict, and masculinity (Kagen, 2022). Indeed, this hegemonic understanding of interactivity is so strong it is almost a "cybernetic mantra" (Fizek, 2022, p. 1) partly due to social, cultural, economic, and historical reasons, and partly due to the desire of both the medium and the discipline studying it to establish cultural status and a sense of worthiness. This preoccupation with how we can "do" things with games leads to a particular understanding of how games are and should be played: focusing on action, conflict, performance, or to put simply, doing, not being.

At the intersection of this doing and being is another idea with a conceptual history about as long as game studies itself: agency. Recent years saw a move towards politicising the term, with scholars challenging long-standing truisms

about agency as the ability to act freely on/with/through the world, problematising the relationship between humans and their social, economic, cultural, and technological contexts (Chia & Ruffino, 2022; Girina & Jung, 2020). Notably, agency has been linked with the promotion of individualistic selfhoods that are predominantly "masculinist, colonial, and extractivist" (Chia & Ruffino, 2022, p. 309). I argue that the "cozy" label is inherently political, similarly to the "casual" label (Chess, 2017), and that cozy games as a genre can be a good case study for further examining how hegemonic approaches to play are (re)constructed, but also how they can be challenged and their negative impact on the neoliberal subject mitigated.

The kind of challenge such games represent to more pervasive genres is by no means novel. Mobile games, for example, have been shown to transform not just our playing habits but also how we move through, and live in, spaces (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020). Focusing on subjectivity, there is research on how games can incentivize empathy (Belman & Flanagan, 2012; Pozo, 2018), as well as help establish, manage, and negotiate selfhood in a digitalized world (Gallagher, 2018). Videogames can help with managing these unique anxieties (McGonigal, 2011). They can be seen as a form of selfcare (Kowert, 2020), with increasing academic attention on how games can help improve wellbeing and mood (Reer & Quandt, 2020), and particularly in a peri-pandemic context and in connection to cozy games (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Walsdorff et al., 2022). More overtly concerned with coziness, Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) introduced a cozy game manifesto of sorts to game studies, outlining the main design components of cozy games as safety, abundance, and softness. The aesthetics of the genre have increasingly been connected to mental health benefits (Baker, 2022). Understanding coziness as a matter of degrees that games of both cozy and less cozy genres can possess, they argue that the genre's recent rise in popularity is connected to increasingly threatening anxieties about current affairs, the climate, and politics both global and local. The role of cozy games can therefore be, they argue, seen as offering "safe, emotional, heart-warming experiences" that are a different take on escapism: "not a fulfilment of a fantasy of greatness, but rather a fantasy of stability and safety" (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 228).

But what is it that we need escapism from? The contemporary zeitgeist is characterized by high risk (Beck, 1986) and constant fear of underachievement and failure (Silva, 2013). A unique characteristic of late modernity is what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls a striving for "ontological security". This term encapsulates the feeling of stability and security that we derive from consistent, dependable, predictable, non-threatening, and familiar sequences of events or activities that form part of our daily routines (Giddens, 1984, 1991). Ontological security is tightly connected to the notion of agency as it is formulated in response to "the

need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). The idea of there being a unified, neatly delineated, and stagnant self that works towards ontological security is somewhat overly simplistic, as per a social constructivist understanding of the performative self (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1956). Nonetheless, a self that strives for ontological security as a sort of inner equilibrium and that reflects on and manages social, cultural, political, and other contexts is a productive concept in examining cozy games and agency. This paper further complicates the argument that cozy games soothe us in a turbulent sociopolitical climate by arguing that on the one hand, they absolutely do, but on the other, they also represent as well as encourage less positive aspects of our world and ways of being in it. Individualistic, colonial, extractivist, capitalist, and in other ways harmful. I propose the concept of *cozy agency* as a modality of agency afforded by cozy games (which I understand to be videogames that have a high degree of coziness to their design), which can be theorized further in two steps. First, by looking at how cozy games' design facilitates the (re)construction of neoliberal subjectivity, and second, by thinking of cozy games as affective systems (Anable, 2018), where cuteness and vegetal affect in particular facilitate a (re)negotiation of player agency.

Lifestyle media and the cozy agency of the neoliberal subject

The late capitalist zeitgeist is characterized by neoliberal ideology championing productivity, progress, and quantifiable result generation (Boltanski & Chapello, 2006). Videogames are especially good at (re)creating hypercapitalist systems both on a representational and procedural level (Bogost, 2007; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Giddings & Harvey, 2018). Despite their non-threatening aesthetics, which are in stark contrast with more pervasive game genres, the same can be said to be true of cozy games: they represent, recreate, and play with, capitalism in various ways and to varying degrees. Those with resource management as a core mechanic are especially emblematic of neoliberal ideology and a romanticisation of work-as-play, as they often thematize rural fantasies (NYU Game Center, 2020), as well as a romance of work akin to motivational posters (Bogost, 2011). Tom Nook, the infamous tanuki landlord of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, has been widely regarded as a "capitalistic villain" (Vossen, 2020). Similarly, despite its creator's best efforts, *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) can also be seen as luring players into a gameplay loop that oversimplifies both our relationship with and responsibility for natural resources, and the intricacies of platonic and romantic bonds (Crowley, 2023). It would be hasty to write off the whole genre as neoliberal indoctrination, however. Thinking about the self and agency, and

looking at cozy games through the lens of lifestyle media, that is, media which (re)presents and (re)creates the ordinary, such as reality tv, cooking channels, and makeover shows, helps problematize this further.

Cozy games and lifestyle media have much in common: the focus on the mundane, themes centred on hobbies like cooking and gardening, the workplace, home improvement, and the management of interpersonal relationship. In doing so, lifestyle media offers strategies for betterment which shape the ideal neoliberal subject (Ouellette, 2009; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Palmer, 2004), which is not at all dissimilar from how games can have the capacity to shape how we feel about reality (Bogost, 2007). At the same time, lifestyle media can also be a helpful tool in managing contemporary anxieties (Murray & Ouellette, 2009). While tv shows like *Queer Eye* (Netflix, 2018–) can indeed support an expression of agency by narrativizing the journey of self-actualisation, at the same time consumers of lifestyle media are also encouraged to subscribe to strategies for betterment which are more often than not linked to purchasing products or services that can help facilitating the journey towards a better self. Doing so grants more independence from dysfunctional structures of care eroded by decades of austerity, but it also means more responsibility. The anxiety-mitigating effects of lifestyle media can thus weaken, and the "jostled self" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 33) can potentially begin to crumble under the weight of this newfound responsibility, in a way that is intricately connected to "consumer culture as a resource" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 33). In this way, lifestyle media is linked to consumerist self-expression: we learn about what we should aspire to, and how to best achieve it, we are given tips by experts, and it is all connected to conspicuous consumerism We can see this duality play out at the beginning of many cozy games, where the narrative framing often involves a new beginning for an exhausted and overworked player character, often set up with the iconography of urban living and all its threats on a happy subject.

A common starting point of cozy games is a new life. The player character gets a tabula rasa to right wrongs, implement change, and improve on their quality of life. All this is aided by abundant resources, and a return to manual labour which greatly oversimplifies farm labour, and is far detached from complex postindustrial work processes. Embarking on this journey of building a new life, which is in itself difficult to describe without metaphors linked to labour, the self is a site of labour which is romanticized in cozy games. For example, *Stardew Valley* begins with the following monologue from the player character's Grandpa on his death bed:

> There will come a day when you feel crushed by the burden of modern life and your bright spirit will fade before a growing emptiness. When that happens, my [boy/girl], you will be ready for this gift.

The following scene finds the player character in a soulless corporate office with two overseers looming over the open office panopticon, motivational messages on walls juxtaposed with tightly packed dirty desks. The camera zooms in on the tiny player character trapped in front of a disproportionately large screen. They reach for Grandpa's letter in the drawer telling of the gift of the farm in Stardew Valley, which will hopefully help reconnect with nature and friends. But what does that reconnection look like? The gameplay loop is harvesting natural resources, accumulation, manufacturing, and trading of goods, and accumulation of social capital. Similarly in *Ooblets* (Glumberland, 2020), the intro screen greets us with the message "Your life has been a giant toot" with large font in the centre screen.

> So far, you've spent all of that tooty life on the isolated Ahroh Island, where the people are stuffy and there aren't even any ooblets. That's why you've decided to leave. You're off to the distant shores of mainland Oob. A place you've only heard vague tales of. A fabled land of oddity, creativity, and… Ooblets.

In real life however, there rarely ever is a "self as a blank state" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 35). The neoliberal self is always intertwined with social, cultural, economic, environmental, and political contexts, representing the hegemony of norms they aspire to fit into. Raisborough argues that "to be seen, recognized, and approved (or not) brings into play a host of culturally specific norms and values against which the self is evaluated. This point considerably dilutes the potency of atomized individualism suggested by the 'blank state'" (p. 36). The duality of cozy agency therefore lies in this negotiation of neoliberal subjectivity. Such games offer an opportunity to both critique everything that is wrong with our world, provide strategies for controlling the uncontrollable particularly in the context of subjectivity and labour, but at the same time they continue to lock us into the same very logics of growth, progress, pressure, and individual responsibility that we are trying to escape from.

Cozy agency and affect: Cuteness and the vegetal turn

A useful framework that helps detaching interactivity and gameplay from each other is that of affect, as it facilitates the exploration of all experiences and modalities of action offered by gameplay, however interactive or non-interactive they may be (Frome, 2019, p. 858). We can think of *cozy agency* as the balancing act processing and potentially reconciling "mixed affect", that is, the capacity of games to simultaneously offer "hedonistic", i.e. joyful, and "eudaimonic", i.e., challenging or difficult experiences (Cole & Gilles, 2022). While there are videogames that hide rather punishing gameplay behind a veneer of cuteness, such as survival-horror

light *Don't Starve* (Klei, 2013) or rouguelike *Cult of the Lamb* (Massive Monster, 2022), cozy games generally can also offer relief from the pressures of the modern world, primarily due to their non-threatening game design and themes of safety, abundance, and an almost Rousseauian desire to return to simpler times.

An aesthetic category that emerged in response to late capitalism's challenges on the subject is cuteness. Indeed, "indulging in and communicating through cuteness provides an important coping strategy for subjects caught up in the precariousness inherent to neoliberal capitalism, and is thus central to the establishment of contemporary (inter)subjectivities" (Dale, 2017, pp. 1–2). While the authors of the cozy game manifesto explicitly state that cuteness does not map exactly onto coziness (Short et al., 2018), when it comes to the visual style of many cozy games, we can still observe less saturated colour palettes, rounded shapes, and an almost painterly style that is very clearly not concerned with the hubristic focus on realism driving graphics card and console sales. Similarly, soft and unthreatening sound design that lacks sharp loud noises, an ambient soundtrack, a focus on nature sounds over sounds of machinery, and happy animal noises create a warm and welcoming soundscape that offers escape from urban cacophony. Cuteness, as both an aesthetic and an affect, creates a hierarchical relationship between the passive cute object and the agentic subject observing it. Cozy games with cute aesthetics thus can grant players an amplified sense of agency because they are the subject taking in the cozy object, evoking a desire to nurture, care, and tend to, similar to the affective qualities of cuteness. Moreover, cuteness has the potential to reverse the affective consequences of its object, exemplifying "a situation in which making a world smaller – or, if you like, cuter – results in an uncanny reversal, changing its meaning into its exact opposite" (Ngai, 2012, p. 87). In this sense, cozy games with cute aesthetics provide strategies to reinstate a sense of control lost in our struggle for ontological security, providing the opportunity to turn a hostile world on its head, reinforcing agency by disarming its threats.

Another common feature in cozy games is a focus on the natural world and taming thereof. Plants are of course not unique to this genre. Bushes to hide in go hand in hand with stealth mechanics, while rendering highly detailed – and importantly, realistic – natural environments is a common way to showcase powerful graphics engines in shooters or driving games. For example, the first quarter of the Announce Trailer to *Forza Horizon 5* (Playground, 2021) is close-ups of palm trees rustling in the wind, lush jungle floors, a desert oasis with tall cacti, and verdant hills and valleys covered in grass and flowers, each rendered in 4K as per the video's watermark (Xbox, 2021). But these plants are only a backdrop. Interestingly, it is in a genre that capitalizes on the polar opposite of cozy affect that we can find more consequential vegetation: horror games. Games like *Blair Witch* (Bloober Team, 2019) exploit existing assumptions of forests

having a will of their own, where the horror affect comes from the player being forced to surrender their agency to menacingly designed agentic trees (Seller, 2020). The reversal of this argument can help make sense of why growing and tending to flowers, bushes, orchards, fields, and other vegetal objects in cozy games can encourage and enhance a sense of agency and empowerment.

Luce Irigaray, a philosopher linked to the so-called "vegetal turn" in metaphysics, writes the following about sensory perception and plants:

> Gazing at a rose can help me to achieve a concentration that many words or discourses are not able to grant me. The combination of the sensible qualities of the flower gathers me, thanks to an attention they awaken at various levels, and, imperceptibly, I am brought from concentration to contemplation. If I take the time to live such a state, it can be converted into a sort of ecstasy, which results from a culmination of energy (Irigaray & Marder, 2016, pp. 28–29).

Following on this, while virtual flora of course does not afford tactile or olfactory engagement, I would still argue that encountering the beautifully illustrated environments of *Wytchwood* (Alientrap, 2021) or the lush forests of *Bear and Breakfast* (Gummycat, 2020) can have a soothing effect. Automated animations of verdant canopies gently swaying, the ambient lull of blades of grass rustling together, or fallen leaves being swirled around by the gentlest of breezes thus can ground the player in the present, offering temporary respite. But there is more. Especially in cozy games that incorporate a farming mechanic, or feature looking after plants, we can argue that agency is further amplified. Vegetal agents in virtual environments are often conceived of as threats (Seller, 2020), feeding off our long-harboured anxieties that plants have a shared connected consciousness and will someday even take revenge for our millenia-long exploits (Wohlleben, 2015). While some cozy games, like *Strange Horticulture*, exploit this fear to create a strange and eerie atmosphere (Kagen & Minnen, 2023), games like many of the above-mentioned, as well as *My Time in Portia* (Pathea 2019), the recently re-released *Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life* (Marvellous, 2023), or even *Farming Simulator* (GIANTS, 2008) or *Graveyard Keeper* (Lazy Bear, 2018), offer a power fantasy that amplifies our sense of agency as we master the environment: purchase seeds, arrange rows of produce, plan and control their growth, decorate the surrounding farm, thereby becoming masters of nature's destiny.

What is even more interesting is that these cycles of labour do not tend to represent realistic processes of farm work. Most cozy games present a one-person-does-all approach, where delegation or automation is rarely an option (unless the player character's spouse AI picks up watering duties in *Stardew Valley*, for example), which romanticizes farm labour. As such, agency is amplified on multiple

levels. Firstly, we get to gaze upon beautiful flora, marvel at its organic beauty, and thereby find solace and peace in nature effectively running itself. Second, we get to control this flora, we are the arbiter of the fate of each flower, bush, and tree. Our progression in the game is intimately connected with how well we can care for these plants. And this power is further enhanced by our underlying fear of nature growing, quite literally, out of control.

Conclusion

In sociologyspeak, late modernity is characterized by fragmentation and a growing responsibility on the individual as the external structures holding up continuity have either collapsed or are changing so fast that no equilibrium can be established against them. With the increased responsibility comes more agency, granted, but that in turn brings with it a host of new anxieties. Much like how disaster films fell out of fashion post-9/11 because the possibility of the catastrophic loss of thousands of lives and the consequent international war suddenly did not feel like such an unlikely fantasy future, so are previously dominant game genres that thematize violence and threatening scenarios seeming to give way to less violent, less threatening ones. Cozy mechanics are increasingly found in non-cozy games, with some commentators forecasting a major shift in taste and trends (Campbell, 2022; The Escapist, 2022).

I argued that what drives this change can be explained with a striving for "ontological security" which is the sense of stability we so profoundly lack in neoliberal society. Drawing on research on neoliberal subjectivity and lifestyle media, cuteness and affect, and the vegetal turn, I examined the extent to which cozy games can be thought of as offering escapism from, or even resistance to, anxieties caused by neoliberal ideology. Challenging hegemonic understandings of interactivity and agency, I introduced the concept of *cozy agency* to explain how cozy games, on the one hand, encourage affective engagement that helps players cope with contemporary anxieties in everyday life due to comforting repetitive tasks that create a steady routine, a comparative lack of time-critical challenges creating a sense of safety, the abundance rather than scarcity of resources, and soothing audiovisual aesthetics; and on the other, how they (re)present and (re)enforce neoliberal doctrines of individualism, extractivism, and the neverending pursuit of progress and growth. The concept of *cozy agency* thus helped shed light on the modalities of agencies designing for coziness can support or restrain.

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Alexander Calloway *

No Uglies: Rejection and Utopia in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

A b s t r a c t

What motivates cruelty against video game characters designed to be friendly? Using human-to-NPC interactions within the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as a case study, this paper seeks to define what aspects of a cozy game contribute towards public displays of aggression or kindness toward the game's characters. An examination of public forums dedicated to discussing villagers deemed *ugly* reveals the importance of parasocial connections in the utopian community planning aspects of *Animal Crossing*'s gameplay. The resulting online discourse surrounding ethical treatment of villagers becomes part of players' conceptions of their role as social planner in-game, further solidifying which behaviors and objectives will yield them the coziest experience. Paratext, therefore, plays an active role in the conception and socialization of *Animal Crossing* players' utopian urban projects.

Keywords: Animal Crossing, utopia, empathy, cruelty, paratext, community

Content warning: hateful language, swearing, descriptions of graphic violence.

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Introduction

The *Animal Crossing* franchise, founded in 2001 and most recently updated in 2020, can be understood as a sort of ur-text, or the originating point, for the cozy gaming subgenre. Although their aesthetics and mechanics have existed in gaming for decades, cozy games can be separated from their counterparts by their adherence to a philosophy of gaming as a restorative, pleasurable, and anti-stress practice. Tanya X Short and other participants of a workshop that concluded with a report on coziness (2018) describe several means by which cozy games are effectively designed: in addition to inviting audiovisual qualities, coziness is achieved through guiding principles such as self-determination, mundanity, narrative intimacy, and evocations of nostalgia. Importantly, cozy games embody several or all these traits simultaneously, encouraging players to cultivate psychological, rather than physical, needs through the ritual of play. Equally essential to a definition of cozy gaming is its usefulness as a reactive movement, where gameplay is therapeutic and dissociated from external political and cultural systems of discord. As described by Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020), cozy games create "a fantasy of stability and safety" for players (p. 228). Scholarly works focusing on cozy gaming frequently cite *Animal Crossing* and its prosocial, utopic use of these themes as the distinctive allure of cozy games for players and fan communities (Short et al., 2018). However, many *Animal Crossing* players online also enjoy ridiculing certain *villagers* (plush anthropomorphic animals which serve as the game's non-playable characters) based on their personalities and appearances – sharply opposing the game's cheery, peaceful demeanor. In response, many of the most widely disliked villagers have developed disproportionately sized fan clubs dedicated to their protection and defense in both public and private forms of play.

This is not to suggest that players engaging in the rejection of villagers are somehow less invested in the cozy qualities of *Animal Crossing* games. Rather, it highlights a compelling tension within cozy gaming's utopian ideals: while some *Animal Crossing* players find comfort through socializing with any character, others derive pleasure primarily from the selective assembly of beloved villagers. For these players, the presence of an "ugly" (a popular term used in online forums and the opposite of a "dreamie," a player's favorite or most desired villager) creates a frustrating obstacle to their enjoyment of the cozy qualities of the game, namely its promise of a utopic web of uncomplicated prosocial relationships. If *Animal Crossing* implicitly encourages certain social behavior, how can a cozy game respond when players behave in opposition to the norm? In other words, is the player ultimately responsible for perpetuating a game's sense of coziness? And if so, whose sense of coziness is being crafted: theirs, or the world's? The following sections will examine both ideologies' forms of interaction online and in-game. Featured displays of aggression and charity demonstrate how player behavior is constructed

simultaneously through intentional gameplay and role-playing within the world of *Animal Crossing*, and also via interaction and recollection with other fans through virtual message boards. The frictions and overlaps within these communities serve to highlight the significance of paratexts – user-generated materials that supplement and annotate a work's meaning – to cozy gaming as a subgenre, and how they influence the often-solitary experience of enjoying a cozy game.

Methodologies

While each successive game within the *Animal Crossing* franchise provides the player with familiar sets of objectives and gameplay mechanics, this article will primarily examine the phenomenon of villager-player relationships within the newest entry into the franchise, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020). This is attributable to the game's wider array of villagers for the player to encounter, the game's explicit themes of total spatial customization of the player's home island, and the large and active current player base. This final point holds particular weight, as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* experienced additional cultural and commercial acclaim upon release due to its proximity to many early quarantine orders during the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The many cozy elements of the game's design offered a surrogate space for social interaction in a time of extreme isolation, providing players with the capacity to give and receive social care separate from the anxieties and tragedies of uncertain times (Zhu, 2020, p. 158). As a result, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offers unique insights into the needs and behaviors of cozy gaming communities.

Although in-game patterns of play are essential to understanding player behavior, they do not tell the full story. Community engagement with a game's narrative often occurs beyond the borders of the game world, most notably through social networks. This dimension of interactivity is considered paratext: material that "develops around or adds to the main text(s) of the videogame['s] narratives" (Mukherjee, 2016, p. 60). Paratext can act as an extension of the player's gaming experience, reconfiguring and assigning additional meaning to choices, behaviors, and mechanics beyond the original vision of the developer. Employed in fan communities as an essential aspect of expressing a work's meaning or value, paratext in gaming is most frequently articulated through the recording of unique play histories and related discussions, which publicize narratives of player experience (Mukherjee, 2015; Geraghty, 2015; Švelch, 2017). In the case of gaming, this content can also be understood as an affective force capable of shaping cultural discourse. The production and consumption of online paratexts within a game's greater community not only provides venues for community activity, but also manufactures perceived best practices in-game, which are used to indicate insider

status and achieve artificial or tangible goals (Consalvo, 2017, p. 177). For a cozy game like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, paratextual content often focuses on idealized displays of comfort and pleasure during one's gameplay. This paper will primarily feature such paratexts, gathered from online discussion boards dedicated specifically to *Animal Crossing*. Quotations from community members were collected from publicly available forum posts made on the websites reddit.com, belltreeforums.com, and gamefaqs.com. In accordance with suggestions made by Shi Min Chua (2022) on the ethics of digital ethnographic data, the identity of their posters and the source website in question will be anonymized in most circumstances to retain a sense of digital privacy.

Coziness through sociality

Animal Crossing is, at its very nature, a game about socializing (Cesar, 2020). While players are certainly permitted to ignore their villagers and focus on more individual tasks, positive social interaction is essentially unavoidable during gameplay. Villagers will approach players looking for friendly conversation, will mail the player gifts, and will even throw players a surprise party on their birthday. Subsequently, worthwhile parasocial relationships become essential to the player's enjoyment of the game's world. *Animal Crossing* fosters these relationships through several design strategies: characters are assigned distinct personality traits and idiosyncrasies (such as sporty, sleepy, or snooty), which manifest to the player through nicknames, behaviors, and home décor. These encourage players to form parasocial relationships with villagers, fostering genuine excitement at the prospect of positive engagement with them (Pearce et al., 2022). These engagements can be considered quintessentially prosocial: moments where the player feels surrounded by a community of friends and loved ones.

While *Animal Crossing*'s visual and mechanical design embodies many of the traits frequently found within modern cozy games, much of this cozy aesthetic is articulated through the game's encouragement of prosocial contact. To appeal to cozy ideals more powerfully, villagers are designed to embody different identities of cuteness and comfort predictably: Stitches, a stuffed teddy bear, sleepily occupies a plush and pastel home décor set, while the fashion-minded Fuchsia resides in a chic house of red and pink furniture, cracking sarcastic comments on the player's wardrobe. Villagers are designed not only to be players' friends, but predictable social assets, presenting as "an appealing means to experience comfort in a way that can be managed and controlled" (Rose, 2023, p. 7). Managing one's villager population, therefore, is essential to maximizing the enjoyment of an *Animal Crossing* experience, leading many players to seek out information on desirable villagers among gaming communities.

Discussion ranges from forum posts about personal dreamies to massive, crowdsourced polls ranking villager preference monthly on websites such as animalcrossingportal.com (2023). The sheer popularity of the most treasured villagers has even spurred grassroots marketplaces between players, in which both virtual and/or literal currency is traded for beloved villagers (players pay to visit others' islands, which allow them to recruit dreamies). Such industries capitalize on the success of *Animal Crossing*'s prosocial fantasies within players, which have extended demand for villagers beyond the developer's intended acquisition channels (Blom, 2022). For players engaging in this side of the game through purchases, trades, or discussions, the formula becomes clear: the more desired villagers – i.e., the more friends – on the island, the cozier the experience.

Rejection and revulsion: The plight of Rodney

The semi-random processes used to assign villagers to islands, coupled with the sheer number of residents potentially available at any given time, means that players are rarely able to predict which characters they will initially encounter. Considering that players may have a proclivity towards certain types or aesthetics of villagers, those who both defy expectations and deprive players of an anticipated dreamie can be met with hostility and disgust. Characters deemed uglies by fans often have less traditionally cute designs, possess a personality that some players find less appealing, or have a décor set perceived to clash with the player's sensibilities. In other cases, a villager may not be widely disliked, but still holds a negative connotation in a player's mind due to a personal vendetta. Active hostility towards such characters takes several forms: for example, they can be hit with bug-catching nets, or their homes can be vandalized with derogatory objects or signs. In response, villagers will often voice their disapproval or hurt from these actions, marking them as antisocial – actively malicious – by both the player and the game's internal logic.

Where these forms of aggression develop most fascinatingly, however, is online. In a similar manner to engagement surrounding dreamies, digital communities dedicated to discussing *Animal Crossing* allow players to share, encourage, and elaborate upon antisocial urges toward uglies. "I just wanna break his neck and toss him out in the sea," one commenter, referring to a villager named Sherb, writes on a forum discussing the least favorite villagers. Another poster describes the mouse villager Moose as an "absolute neckbearded fuck […] he's SO UGLY, the day he asked to move was the happiest day of my life."[1]

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[1]   In order to maintain anonymity of the authors of the forum posts, the author decided to not include specific references.

The most illuminating example of this phenomenon comes from a reddit community called r/FuckRodney. Rodney, the subject of the forum, is a hamster villager present in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. With a smug demeanor, droopy eyes, and buck teeth, Rodney is generally unpopular among players, often ranking near the bottom of favorability polls. Members of the subreddit regularly share images and text posts expressing their hatred for Rodney in a myriad of violent acts: one poster describes Rodney as a "disgusting, obese, ugly, and worthless specimen," while another created a crude .gif of Rodney's head exploding from his body, unleashing a puddle of pixelated blood.

Figure 1. A player-staged scene of villagers attacking Rodney. Many of these characters consistently rank among the top 25 most popular characters within polls.
Source: https://www.inverse.com/gaming/animal-crossing-new-horizons-rodney-reddit-worst--villagers (accessed on January 15, 2024)

While much of this content conveys a sense of ironic fan participation, it is important to highlight that the level of commitment to abusing Rodney frequently transcends parody: acts are articulated with attention to detail, and popular posts' comments become increasingly referential and elaborate with time. These physical and behavioral patterns of carnage might be understood as an inseparable part of socializing with *Animal Crossing*'s greater cast of characters. Emma Reay (2022) identifies video game avatars and non-playable actors in cozy games like *Animal Crossing* as instances of the "Blithe Child" character: a toylike form typified by its innocence, plasticity, and passivity. By being presented to the player as child-friendly in harmless contexts, a Blithe Child object is configured as one capable of withstanding violence and experimentation in order to empower the player with

a sense of autonomy in their playstyle (Reay, 2022, p. 113). Due to the doll-like image of the character in question, aggression is simply considered another facet of the gaming experience.

Though some members of r/FuckRodney likely feel they are engaging in harmless play, others utilize the platform to voice genuine distress at the presence of an intruder within their paradise, an unwanted tenant forced upon them without their consent. As one reddit user states, "I hate [Rodney] so much! He has such a good spot in my island but he is the one on the plot. I really want him to leave." When considering that some players experience coziness in-game primarily through maximizing prosocial relationships with characters perceived as friends, antisocial behavior towards Rodney can be understood as a public assertion of the player's demands and social needs within the game. Short et al. (2018) identify non-consensual social presence as a design factor which can negate coziness during play. These relationships, they note, can impact players' experiences substantially, and can feel "threatening, or just suggest an unsought expectation of interaction, reciprocation, or responsibility" (n.p.). Rejecting villagers via ostentatious displays of hatred is itself an inherently social act within the larger *Animal Crossing* community, reinforcing the idea of characters as intentionally selected assets to support the player's comfort. This, coupled with the reliance upon player action for the game world to function, sees violence as a tool to perfect and occasionally rehabilitate cozy experiences amidst disruptions.

Defenders of the ugly

Nevertheless, likeability is within the eye of the beholder: some players have taken to defending the villagers on grounds that their rejection is undeserved or excessive. In the case of Rodney, for instance, a competing community – r/RespectRodney – was created, expressly for the purpose of demonstrating support and prosocial interactions between him and players. Through fanart and in-game screenshots, users describe Rodney as their "bestest pal" and "finally getting the respect he deserves." Here, the paratextual support of Rodney is as critical to players' roles as good virtual neighbors are in-game prosocial behavior. As Jeffrey Ho and Ryan Ng (2022) describe, the instinct to defend and care for Rodney is rooted in a feeling of virtual proximity and victimization, which in turn create empathy towards Rodney's paratextual condemnation.

Moreover, Rodney's public suffering potentially increases a player's altruism: when examining anthropomorphic representations of unattractive endangered species, Alvin A.Y.-H. Chan (2012) asserts that demonstrations of the species' sufferings were more valuable in generating viewer empathy than other scenes of behavior. Rodney's widespread reputation online as a notable ugly, while marking

him for violence, also galvanizes a player base that ties their experience of coziness to an empathetic, stewardly treatment of all villagers. Many players who likely may have never encountered Rodney or kept their friendship with him private instead feel empowered to vocalize their support: to quote one reddit user in 2022, "[a]ll these cute little animals want is to be our friend, but we draw the line with them and judge them entirely based on skin-deep appearances." Actively avoiding antisocial behavior at all costs becomes an intentional aspect of their gameplay, motivated primarily through their empathetic engagement with anti-ugly paratext online.

Paratext, utopia, and community

The sharing of distinct character interactions online not only reinforces paratextual engagement, but also player perceptions that villager relationships are unique and spontaneous (Rose, 2023). Importantly, no distinction between prosocial and antisocial relationships is made here. Through hating or adoring uglies, players are constructing their gameplay experience's core values and goals, which are in turn validated through solidarity with others online. For these players, *Animal Crossing* is made cozier by the discourse, despite seeing their relationships with villagers as personal. Relationships are determined through player opinion, and the actions players take to support or construct these dynamics forge narrative throughlines to their experience (Kouratoras, 2022). This narrative is the central crux to *Animal Crossing*: how will you govern among this community?

It is no surprise that this narrative, plainly containing utopian subtext, includes utopian tools through which players can progress their narrative. By the parameters laid forth by Michał Kłosiński's (2018) analysis of the utopia in gaming, *Animal Crossing* players engage with these tools by commanding direct control over the social and cultural forces governing their virtual settings, including civil engineering, material culture such as flags and anthems, and the selection (or aspiration towards) an idealized roster of villagers. In doing so, players are naturally motivated to create a community which improves upon their perceived experiences within their non-virtual lives. Pursuing the game's objectives and narratives, all directing the player towards this utopian ideal, allows the player to feel in control of their time and as though they are positively contributing to a project (Xong et al., 2021). Interestingly, these are the very same mechanics which have been used to describe *Animal Crossing* as cozy. Here, coziness and utopia can be understood as identical, if not deeply interconnected philosophies within the game. Prosocial or antisocial behaviors towards characters are not only attempts to foster a cozy playing experience but are themselves utopic sentiments. Here,

villager value exists on a spectrum between creators and recipients – features of a personal utopia, or the inheritors of a utopia built for them.

How players determine the characters' roles in their utopia largely relies on two key factors: the perceived autonomy of the villagers and the desired aesthetic, if any, of the player's island. Players are less likely to empathize with characters they view as inherently programmed entities, incapable of creative expression (Harth, 2017). In the case of *Animal Crossing*, individuals who interact with villagers frequently find them repeating conversations and jokes, lessening their perceived agency in the game world (Xong et al., 2021). One forum poster describes this succinctly, stating "[villagers] are decorative at best as none of them have a real personality. Having two of the same kind on your island means getting the same boring conversations again and again." In these cases, such players might experience no social benefits whatsoever, particularly in limiting feelings of social isolation (Lewis et al., 2021). For these players, there is little sense in considering villagers beyond their role as Blithe Child objects or as decorative utility to the player's personal vision of coziness. However, other players view these imperfections as character quirks in addition to programming limitations. These players are motivated to embrace villager autonomy as a necessary aspect of the game's suspension of disbelief, growing to love them as people despite their limited personality (Harth, 2017). Juxtaposed with a utopia that pictures villagers as ornamental, these players might include imagined character input as a continuation of play.

Beyond personalities, villagers may simply fit a certain visual genre more effectively than others, leading to greater perceived value. The virtually limitless options for stylistic and referential world design afforded to the player allows for the creation of meticulous and artistic renditions of popular aesthetics. For many players, villagers play an active role in this design: for example, an island presenting as a busy city block may be amplified by the presence of punk rock or food-themed characters. Paratext generated by other players can provide inspiration and references for a pleasing experience, creating a tangible focus for a player's utopian ideals. This paratext frequently includes recommendations on which villagers would fit the desired aesthetic and contribute to overall coziness. Their personalities may still be important to these players but are viewed as secondary or subordinate to the values communicated by their visual appeal. When villagers clash with a highly aestheticized island, the resulting visual interruption can feel like an obstacle towards utopian realizations.

In an interview with Patricia Hernandez (2020), one player vocalizes this frustration, stating "Now that I can meticulously plan every inch of my island, crafting my own experience and expressing myself through city planning, I am a lot more bothered by seeing villagers who don't match my vision" (n.p.). Conversely, paratext towards designing utopic spaces for the joy and comfort of individual

villagers also exists. In the expansion pack for *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, titled *Animal Crossing: Happy Home Paradise*, villagers not currently residing on a player's island can have a home designed by the player to their specifications. With the requirement of permanent residency removed, players are made to feel a sense of accomplishment in designing the utopian home for any character they wish, frequently sharing design inspirations through paratext repositories such as forums and video sharing channels.

Figure 2. An example of villager-planning paratext. Here, the Youtuber is providing advice on selecting cottagecore villagers, characters aligning with a traditional cozy aesthetic. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AODHXGS2YuQ (accessed on January 15, 2024)

Conclusion

Both prosocial and antisocial behaviors towards non-playable characters in virtual landscapes can be understood as the player responding to the conditions laid forth by the game's world. In the case of *Animal Crossing*, a game whose essential objectives are tied to maximizing the level of relaxation and parasocial bonding between the player and their villagers, both behaviors are motivated by the innate desire to engage in a utopian social network, wherein the player plays the dual

roles of designer and beneficiary. The presence of a particular dreamie or ugly is significant for the stability of players' utopic visions, reconfiguring excessive prosocial and antisocial behavior as necessary expressions of joy, frustration, contentment, and ambition. These emotions are amplified through the game's paratext, itself a complex social network with differing utopic visions. Players form their utopian social perspectives both internally and in response to paratextual recommendations and condemnations of certain villagers. From this case study, it is clear that coziness in gaming is more than simply mechanics and aesthetics: coziness can also be understood as the interaction between the game's objectives, community paratexts which codify coziness, and the utopian aspirations of the player within the game's world. Approaching future cozy game studies through an examination of the tensions and connections between these three forces will allow for more nuanced perspectives on player communities and motivations. Only then can a cozy experience be guaranteed for everyone – ugly and dreamie alike.

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Ludography

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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 *hyggeli*g 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

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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. *ALTTL* 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-pace, 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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Cozy Heterotopias in JRPGs: A Foucauldian Perspective on the Spatiality of Coziness in Japanese Role-Playing Games

Abstract

This article applies the concept of heterotopia as developed by Michel Foucault to cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. After introducing the concept of heterotopia and its six key principles, the term *JRPG* is briefly reflected upon. We then analyze key aspects of the games *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* regarding the significance of heterotopias for their sense of coziness. We conclude that Foucault's concept of heterotopia helps in understanding the way in which coziness, on the one hand, offers a respite from the crises of life while, on the other hand, enabling an engagement with said crises in a safe environment.

Keywords: cozy games, heterotopia, Japanese role-playing games, game studies

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Introduction

In this article, we analyze how coziness, at least in a selection of prominent Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), can be interpreted as heterotopias in the sense of Michel Foucault, i.e., 'other places' that provide an escape from, but also an opportunity to engage with, crises. Coziness in video games has risen in prominence as a subject within game studies in correlation with the popularity of so-called *cozy games*. Short et al. (2018) identify three crucial tenets of coziness in video games: safety, abundance, and softness. Cozy games deviate from the prominence of combat and survival and instead focus on higher-level needs, such as mastery, self-reflection, and connectedness (Short et al., 2018). Bellingham (2022) aptly describes cozy games as follows:

> While there isn't an official definition for what a cozy game is exactly, those that do fall under this categorization have a particular vibe that is easy to spot. 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 (paragraph 2).

Waszkiewicz & Bakun (2020, p. 233) further disambiguate between three types of cozy aesthetics: coherent cozy aesthetics that present coziness as consistent with the game's narrative and gameplay, dissonant cozy aesthetics that present a contrast between the game's narrative on the one hand and the gameplay on the other (often to make a specific point about contentious themes), and situational cozy aesthetics that occur in individual sections of a game. The latter is especially important since the examples discussed in this article are not cozy games in the strict sense of the term, i.e., they do feature elements of combat and survival.

First, however, we wish to illustrate the concept of heterotopia from a Foucauldian perspective and highlight how it is connected to cozy aesthetics in video games. Then, we provide a brief elaboration on, and critical reflection of, the term *Japanese role-playing games*. Finally, we apply the theoretical considerations to two example sequences from well-renowned JRPGs, namely: *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (Level-5, 2011) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix, 2020). Combining a close reading of specific elements of these games, we conclude that both examples integrate, though in different ways, heterotopian functions with cozy aesthetics.

The concept of heterotopia and its applicability to video games

The term *heterotopia* is a compound of *other* (*hetero*) and *places* (*topoi*). According to Foucault (1986), such 'counter-places' can be found in every culture and civilization. These places stand in contrast to what is considered common or

permissible. For example, while nudity is relatively restricted in public spaces, it is quite the opposite in a sauna. Such heterotopias essentially compensate for otherwise rigid regulations by creating a space to disengage from them – at least temporarily. In this article, we concentrate on heterotopias of crisis, i.e., "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (Foucault, 1986, p. 4). We claim that video games can fulfill a heterotopian function and that cozy aesthetics especially hold the potential to not only provide a retreat from the macro- and microsocial crises, but also a space to process them.

Foucault's original conceptualization of heterotopias comes with six key principles that inform the analysis of cozy aesthetics below. Not all these principles have to apply for a space to be considered a heterotopia, but they aid in understanding the functions of heterotopias within societies as well as within video games. They are illustrated here regarding their connection to the latter.

The first principle states that heterotopias are a constant in human societies. According to Foucault (1986), "there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias" (p. 4). While this might be a generalization that warrants further scrutiny, it is mirrored by the omnipresence of games across cultures, which can be interpreted as a particular form of heterotopia. While we focus on heterotopia in video games, other branches of spatial discourse within game studies do consider the interpretation of games themselves as heterotopia, for example in Aarseth and Günzel (2019).

The second principle is that heterotopias take on a specific societal function. They provide exemption from certain rules, offer space for reflection, and enable an engagement with crises. This certainly reflects in the engagement with cozy games to which Short et al. (2018) ascribe a clear function as well: "Cozy games give players space to deal with emotional and social maintenance and growth" (section 1).

The third principle is the multiplication of spaces. According to Foucault (1986), heterotopias juxtapose "several spaces, which are in themselves incompatible" (p. 6). Foucault illustrates this with the example of a theater in which several places are found one after the other in the same place, i.e., the theater stage hosts a variety of fictional places. A similar multiplication of spaces can be identified in video games, for example in the exploration of fantastical worlds in the *Super Mario* series (Nintendo, 1985–).

The fourth principle pertains to the significance of time in heterotopias. For this, Foucault (1986) employs the term *heterochrony*, which indicates that heterotopias contrast the temporality of society. Cozy games as heterotopias are consequently demarcated by their abundance of time in contrast to daily life. Further, cozy games tend to evoke "a feeling of nostalgia" (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 227),

deliberately removing themselves from the inevitable linearity of technological progress.[1]

The fifth principle is that heterotopias are characterized by a system of "opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault, 1986, p. 7). Heterotopias are not public spaces per se. They are separated by a border that can be crossed through a designated entrance, whether such an entrance is physical or a ritualistic process. Games feature such clear openings and closings if one subscribes to the idea of Johan Huizinga's (1938/1980) magic circle, which delineates the spatial as well as temporal beginning and ending of a game.

The sixth principle is that heterotopias enable a critical reflection upon the world that exists outside of them. Heterotopias can create an illusion which reveals that all other spaces are equally illusory, or they can create an alternative, orderly space compared to the disorder at other spaces (Foucault, 1986, p. 8). Cozy aesthetics similarly provide a playful space that enables a critical reflection upon the persisting need for productivity in daily life.

These six principles guide the understanding of heterotopias that we wish to apply for the analysis of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. It is important to mention that the application of the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia to video games has also been discussed critically in recent years. Sara McNamee (2020) and Maurício Liesen (2008) present two attempts of applying the concept of heterotopia to video games. Aarseth and Günzel (2019) further introduce the term 'ludotopia' – a perspective indicative of the spatial turn in game studies at large. However, Stephan Günzel (2020) also warns against an inflationary use of the term *heterotopia*, since it would diminish the analytical value of the concept (p. 166). Harald Koberg (2021) also criticizes that the question of whether games can be considered heterotopias is of little value (p. 116). While acknowledging these critical perspectives, we argue that there is value in analyzing how cozy aesthetics intersect with heterotopias. There are notable parallels between their characteristics and viewing cozy aesthetics as heterotopias may enhance our understanding of coziness in video games beyond escapism, allowing for critical reflection on personal and societal crises.

JRPG as a contested term

While we employ the term JRPG in this article, it is important to acknowledge that the term comes with some complications. The abbreviation stands for *Japanese role-playing games*, suggesting games that are developed in Japan, made by Japanese developers, or have some distinct features that render them quintessentially *Japanese*. That this assumption is inaccurate at best has already been pointed out by Wada (2017, p. 142), who traces the history of JRPGs back to Western tabletop

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[1]   For a discussion of the concept of heterochrony in video games see Tobias Unterhuber (2022).

games. Within the limitations of this article, we cannot explore the intricacies of genre discourse in depth (see Feige [2015] for an elaborate discussion of video game genres and Roth et al. [2021] for a recent engagement with Japanese media culture), but we do wish to point out some crucial tenets of the debate.

Mattias Van Ommen (2018) points out that "a majority of people do use the terms JRPG and WRPG (Western Role-Playing Game) as constituting different video game genres rather than denoting geographical origin alone" (p. 9). Douglas Schules (2015) highlights that it is indeed peculiar that JRPGs receive their own abbreviation whereas titles from other countries, such as *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007), do not, even though they also draw from national history and folklore (p. 6). Similarly, Mattias Van Ommen (2018) assumes that the differentiation between JRPGs and WRPGs may well be due to the conceptual reinforcement of cultural differences and orientalism (p. 10). What is more, players commonly associate JRPGs with a fully refined protagonist and fantastical designs, whereas WRPGs are more commonly associated with a blank slate character and realism (Van Ommen, 2018, p. 9).

The predominant assessment within video game studies is that the idiosyncrasies of JRPGs are to be found within the broader historical, cultural, and economic context in which Japanese games have developed. This entails the culture of media mix, i.e., "the practice of marketing interconnected works for different media (manga, anime, movies, etc.) and tie-in products, generally through the promotion of attractive characters (*kyara*[2]) and an engaging fictional world (*sekai*)" (Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2015, p. 4). The concept of media mix shares some similarities with Henry Jenkins' (2008) notion of transmedia storytelling, but rather than hinging on the story, media mix relies on characters that "appear in different stories and settings that do not necessarily have to make any coherent or continuous sense" (Blom, 2021, p. 5). Further, "Japanese video games, or *geemu*, are not linked to an 'essence' of any kinds (national, mediatic, etc.), but to a market, or rather to – admittedly unstable and fluctuating – markets" (Picard, 2013, p. 2). The Japanese market is one that Picard refers to as 'glocal' since it emerged in the context of strong international collaborations, but also several peculiarities of the local market.

Notably, the term *JRPG* has come to be criticized by Japanese game developers. This was most vividly illustrated when Naoki Yoshida, producer of *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix, 2010) and *Final Fantasy XVI* (Square Enix, 2023), argued that the separation between Western and Japanese RPGs was not only arbitrary but belittling to Japanese developers since it effectively assigned RPGs developed in Japan to a separate category of video games, which would not directly compete

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[2]   *Kyara* is used in contrast to *kyaraktā*. *Kyara* indicates "a visual icon without a story" that can effortlessly appear in other forms of media whereas *kyaraktā* indicates a "dramatis persona that develops as a person in a story" (Blom, 2021, p. 4).

with Western counterparts (Skill Up, 2023, TC 28:24–30:15). Accordingly, the term *JRPG* is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it establishes a distinction that is at best unwarranted and at worst exclusive. On the other hand, it does emphasize the specifics of a highly influential market within the domain of video games, enabling scholars and critics alike to analyze the permeations of the letter *J* in *JRPG*. The term is thus implemented in this article with the aforementioned complication in mind: as an ill-defined ascription that draws an unfavorable distinction while still providing the opportunity to engage with the evident specificity of Japanese media culture.

Analyses

The following sections present an application of the above-illustrated concept of heterotopias in conjunction with the notion of coziness. As will be illustrated here briefly, the two examples, *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch*[3] and *Final Fantasy VII Remake*,[4] were selected since they both have an established standing amongst JRPGs, are integrated into the media mix of Japanese culture, and were released with Western audiences in mind.

Ni no Kuni was initially released for the Nintendo DS in 2010, adapted as *Wrath of the White Witch* in 2011 for PlayStation 3, and brought to Western markets in 2013. *Ni no Kuni* has sold an estimate of 1.5 million copies worldwide by 2019[5] and spawned several sequels as well as a tie-in feature film. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is a contemporary interpretation of the 1997 classic *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997), which contributed to the popularity of JRPGs not only in the broadly understood West but in Japan as well (Roth et al., 2021, p. 24). By September 2023, the remake has sold over 7 million copies worldwide on all platforms (Khayl, 2023). It has spawned a series of tie-in games on various platforms as well as a feature film. The analyzed games have been played to completion and were subjected to close playing as proposed by Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum (2011).

Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

The notion of Foucauldian heterotopias is already conceptually imbued in the narrative of *Ni no Kuni*. The original Japanese title, 二ノ国, translates to 'second world'. This second world is where the protagonist, a young boy named Oliver,

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[3] Other noteworthy contributions to the analysis of *Ni no Kuni* include Denison (2023) and Sapach (2017).

[4] Other noteworthy contributions to the analysis of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* include Brown (2023) and Mc Glynn (2023).

[5] Sales data according to vgchartz.com (n.d.).

travels after the tragic death of his mother. Confronted with a crisis of grief and regret, Oliver wishes to make things right. The second world becomes his second chance at preventing a tragedy as the evil wizard Shadar threatens to plunge the world into darkness.

On the most general level, the second world of *Ni no Kuni* functions as a cozy heterotopia in several ways. First, it provides Oliver with the opportunity to escape to an alternative universe in which he encounters magical creatures, forms social bonds, and gradually learns to wield the power of magic. In Motorville, his small 1960s-inspired hometown, Oliver feels lonely and powerless, whereas the second, new world operates as a cozy retreat in which he can safely process the tragedy that befell his family.

The world he travels to is demarcated by a ritual of opening and closing. Upon first entering the second world, Oliver casts a spell called 'Gateway', which is illustrated as a majestic gate through which he travels in a cutscene. This ritual of spell casting simultaneously indicates the separation and interconnectedness of both worlds in the very sense of a Foucauldian heterotopia, including the principle of opening and closing. The latter is especially important in the context of coziness since Oliver can henceforth travel between worlds at his own discretion. What was previously a persistent and inevitable confrontation with the emptiness of his mother being gone, is now mediated by the option to find respite and a sense of belonging in the second world. This heterotopia enables him to process, or leastwise work on, the crisis of grief in a Foucauldian sense.

This very form of escapism could metaphorically mirror the urge of the player to find a soothing haven of safety among the turmoil of daily life. While such a notion largely depends on the individual player and their life situation, *Ni no Kuni* offers the same form of cozy heterotopia to players that it offers to its protagonist. In this way, the close cooperation between the developer studio *Level-5* and *Studio Ghibli* shines through. The integration of renowned *Studio Ghibli* productions, including the wonders of *other worlds*, is a key reason why *Ni no Kuni* can be considered a "hybridization" between video game and feature-film animation (Navarro Remesal, 2013, p. 77).

With the second world under threat, Oliver discovers that he can do good and make a lasting impact on the second world as well as his own. For example, Oliver meets a girl named Esther who appears in an entirely apathetic state. By traveling back to Motorville and finding the girl she is connected to, Oliver manages to not only restore the spirits of Esther but also rekindle the bond of mutual support among a family that lives just down the road in Motorville. Thus, the crucial need that is addressed is a high-level one, that of connectedness, which Short et al. (2018) describe as particularly prevalent in cozy games. This small example of a much broader narrative also illustrates the profound belief in positivity and hopefulness

that fuels cozy aesthetics. As Colin Campbell (2022) states: "The essential nature of cozy gaming is that of helping other people through non-violent means, often by nurture and generosity" (paragraph 3).

However, one element of *Ni no Kuni* appears to be in contradiction with coziness: to progress, players must fight a plethora of real-time battles against an array of monsters. Short et al. (2018) argue that the occurrence of an immediate threat to life may disrupt an established sense of coziness. Though this may be the case, *Ni no Kuni* makes a concerted effort to maintain a cozy heterotopia, even in the face of adversity. Such a seeming contradiction is achieved by reducing the degree to which the threat is threatening. To illustrate this, a close inspection of one combat encounter may be apt. Upon arriving in the fantastical village of Ding Dong Dell, Oliver learns that the town is infested by mice. To assist the regional king, Oliver traverses through the sewers and encounters the ruler of mice (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hickory Dock exemplifies how cozy aesthetics can translate to a combat encounter at the finale of the sewer dungeon in *Ni no Kuni*.
Own screenshot.

While players can die in the fight and are reset only by giving up a fraction of their gold, the oversized mouse does not appear very intimidating. It is, most notably, an anthropomorphized animal. Anthropomorphic animals are, as Campbell (2022) points out, a frequent occurrence to elicit coziness. Further, as can be seen in an insert at the beginning of the encounter, the enemy's name is Hickory Dock, King Hickory XVII (jp. チューベル). In both languages, the name is associated with a sense of cuteness or nostalgia, the latter of which Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) tie directly to cozy games. The English name Hickory Dock is a reference to the eponymous nursery rhyme, starting with the lines: "Hickory, dickory, dock;

the mouse ran up the clock." The Japanese name, Romanized as 'chuuberu', is an onomatopoeia that references the squealing of mice. Thus, the name of the enemy reduces the threat of the encounter by drawing from nostalgia and cuteness.

One further aspect in which *Ni no Kuni* ostensibly establishes itself as a cozy heterotopia is in its presentation of food (Virgen Castro et al., 2018; Waszkiewicz, 2022). Short et al. (2018) as well as Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) stress the significance of food for coziness. For example, as Oliver enters the desert town of Al Mamoon, his trusted companion, Mr. Drippy, points out the local culinary specialty – babanas that look exactly like bananas and, according to the item description, "have a rich, sweet taste that makes them perennially popular" (*Ni no Kuni*). Further, one of the key mechanics of *Ni no Kuni* is to gather familiars – i.e., the monsters one encounters in the wild – and gradually level them up. To do so, one must feed the familiars. As can be seen in Figure 2, the items used as food feature a range of pastries and parfaits, all of which are designed in detail and feature appetizing item descriptions. Thus, *Ni no Kuni* presents food as delicious and abundant.

Figure 2. To permanently strengthen familiars in *Ni no Kuni*, players feed them a variety of detailed treats.
Own screenshot.

While further aspects could be considered for analysis here, those mentioned in this article provide a sufficient illustration of how *Ni no Kuni* establishes its function as a cozy heterotopia. The conceptual framework of the narrative establishes a crisis of grief. The diegetic second world enables the protagonist

an escape that, over the course of the game, allows him to process the loss of his mother. He also finds opportunities for agency that he would otherwise feel devoid of. Alongside purpose and companionship, the second world is rich in culinary treats. Potentially disruptive elements such as combat encounters are largely imbued with cozy aesthetics that render them less threatening while maintaining a ludic challenge that provides ample opportunity for player engagement.

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Final Fantasy VII Remake (*FF VII-R*) mixes elements of the original *Final Fantasy VII* with added story beats and meta-narrative experimentation. The story of *FF VII-R* is set on the fictional planet Gaia, mainly within the city of Midgard. It portrays a dystopian tech-centered future in which the mega corporation Shinra is harvesting Mako, the life energy of the planet. The protagonist and ex-soldier Cloud Strife works as a mercenary for the eco-terrorist group Avalanche. The group attacks Shinra's Mako reactors to try and prevent them from killing the planet.

FF VII-R features semi-real time combat, addresses serious subjects such as traumatic experiences, and operates in a rather serious tone. The narrative focus is on an environmental catastrophe, which can be read as critical commentary on our environmental crisis, which has only become more urgent since the original *Final Fantasy VII* was released (IPCC, 2021). Addressing these topics does not seem very cozy, and *FF VII-R* is not as such a cozy game, but it does feature situational cozy aesthetics that warrant exploration (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 233). We want to highlight this point by focusing on a specific sequence between Tifa and Cloud: the water tower sequence, which gives the player a moment of respite between more challenging parts of the game.

The water tower sequence reveals essential backstory and showcases the emotional connection between Cloud and Tifa. It features an intimate conversation between the characters in their teenage years, as they discuss their future and relationship. The sequence demarcates a significant point of character development for Cloud, as he realizes he must fulfill his promise to help Tifa. The subsequent analepsis shows Tifa and Cloud in their teenage years sitting atop the water tower (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Tifa and Cloud sitting at the water tower, contemplating their future. FF VII-R. Own screenshot.

In an intimate conversation the two characters ponder their future and their relationship. Cloud tells Tifa that he has decided to leave town to become a soldier. Tifa wants him to promise that he will save her if she is "ever trapped or in trouble […]" (*FF VII-R*). Cloud agrees and the analepsis jumps to a more recent sequence in Tifa's bar. Tifa tells Cloud that she "feels trapped" (*FF VII-R*). Back in the present, Cloud realizes that he must fulfill his promise and help Tifa. The sequence thus demarcates a crucial point of character development for Cloud.

Several factors contribute to the coziness of this sequence. Absent from combat, it creates a warm midsummer night atmosphere. The intact wooden village of Nibelheim contrasts the flames seen in other flashbacks, as well as the predominantly steel city of Midgard. The musical score complements the ambiance with its light yet melancholic tone. The camera captures the starry sky, inviting players to share the perspective of Cloud and Tifa, looking at the stars above and the village below. The water tower sequence has become iconic for the character-driven narrative of *Final Fantasy VII* and invokes nostalgic recollections for players familiar with the original game (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020; Figure 4). Also, it can refresh the parasocial relationship between the players and the fictional characters of Tifa and Cloud, which adds an additional layer of nostalgia and coziness (Bloom, 2023).
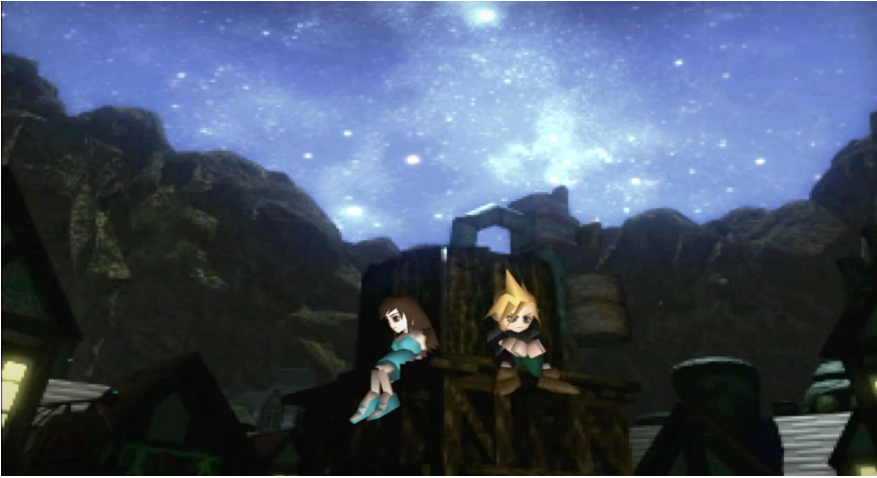
Figure 4. The water tower sequence already became iconic in the original *Final Fantasy VII*, imbued with the same cozy atmosphere.
Own screenshot.

In terms of the Foucauldian conceptualization of heterotopia, the water tower sequence can be described as a crisis heterotopia – the crisis of adolescence. The water tower provides a space in which water is stored and stands still, rather than being used and in flux. It is a space that ordinarily cannot be accessed by the general public. In *FF VII-R* it becomes a place that children and adolescents appropriate as their own, far removed from the world of adults (Unterhuber, 2022). The water tower allows for private conversations hidden from the eyes and ears of others. Thus, it is a place where one can feel safe and see everything above as well as below. For Cloud, the recollection of this place and the conversation with Tifa functions as an initial spark for a change of heart, because after the sequence he acts more open towards Tifa.

The memory of the water tower also fulfills another function in the context of heterotopia. It is a place that exists only in memory since Nibelheim has been burned to the ground. The physical space can thus not be accessed anymore. In the larger crisis of the exploitation of the planet, the recollection of the water tower stands in contrast to the dystopian domain of Midgard and its large constructions of steel. Especially due to the imminent collapse of the planet's ecosystem, the water tower, amongst the wooden houses of Nibelheim, indicates a harmonic co-existence with nature.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed how Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias can contribute to the understanding of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. We interpreted select aspects of *Ni no Kuni* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* against the backdrop of heterotopias. We found that in both cases key aspects that contribute to the games' cozy aesthetics are reflected in the concept of heterotopia. These include the rituals of opening and closing, the juxtaposition of time, the multiplication of spaces, and the heterotopia's function of seeking respite from, but also engaging with, crises. In conclusion, we argue that Foucault's concept of heterotopias can aid in the understanding of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs and that its application supports a differentiated analytical approach to coziness in video games.

As a limitation of our analysis, we wish to highlight that only two video games have been considered here. We do not claim that all JRPGs feature cozy aesthetics nor that cozy aesthetics are a defining trait of JRPGs at large. Rather than making a generalized statement about the genre, if it can be referred to as such, we argue that Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia complements the understanding of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. For further research, it appears promising to draw from more examples to test whether similar findings can be made in the application of heterotopias as a concept to other games that can be considered cozy. There is still much work to be done in the domain of coziness in video games. It may well be worthwhile to consider other conceptual frameworks to analyze the significance of coziness in video games. Lastly, it might even be a possibility to integrate the concept of heterotopia within the spatial discourse revolving around video games, potentially with the prospect to delineate what might be referred to as *heteroludotopia*.

Acknowledgements

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Soft Horrors: The Visual and Ludic Safety of Dark Cozy Games

Abstract

According to their most popular definition, cozy games are characterized by visual softness and relaxing gameplay devoid of combat and time-sensitive gameplay. However, with the recent increase in popularity of these games, game developers started to experiment with genre hybridity, introducing games that combine the elements of coziness with non-cozy elements such as difficult combat or horror themes, showing a need for critical engagement with the working definition of what is *cozy*. The article proposes a concept of *dark cozy games* to describe those titles that introduce visual softness and, to some degree, ludic safety to horror or Gothic, using three examples to illustrate different ways in which that can be achieved: *Cult of the Lamb*, *Dredge*, and *Oxenfree*.

Keywords: cozy games, horror, ludic safety, softness, *Cult of the Lamb*, *Dredge*, *Oxenfree*

Introduction

In April 2023, Nicole Carpenter published a piece on Polygon titled "Cozy Games Are Getting Darker," in which she noted that "the subgenre of cozy games is delving into new territory: the dark cozy game" (Carpenter, 2023, spara. 2). With more and more new games stretching the definition of coziness to encompass thematic

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genres that seemingly are as far from the definition of coziness as possible, the idea of *coziness* as a uniform concept becomes more and more difficult to defend.

Upon hearing the term *cozy games,* we instinctively think about very specific type of games and titles, be it calm, almost meditative puzzle games or farming simulators with a focus on interpersonal relationships like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) or *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020). In many ways, cozy games can be seen as counter-genre that emerged in a response to the highly competitive, fast-paced, and stressful mainstream games, offering the experience of deliberate, meditative slowness and safety. Despite the vast range of genres and themes found under the cozy games label, we usually can tell which game is cozy just by looking at it.

In this paper, I am instead interested in games that problematize the assumption that coziness is straightforward and intuitive. The three games I discuss – *Cult of the Lamb* (Massive Monster, 2022), *Dredge* (Black Salt Games, 2023), and *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio, 2016) – all at first look cozy, but partially reject the expectation of ludic safety. It seems, then, that even though they introduce elements of narrative or ludic danger, thus seemingly going against the very character of cozy gaming, they still are recognizable as cozy as long as 1) their visual style is easily categorized as cute (they fulfill the requirement of visual safety), 2) they counterbalance ludic peril with ludic safety, for example through the introduction of specific locations (or times of day) that guarantee safety, as long as the safe areas allow equal amount of play. At the same time, I argue that the three tenets of coziness listed in a detailed report by Tanya X. Short, Chelsea Howe, Daniel Cook and others (2018)[1], namely softness, safety, and abundance, could instead be reframed as visual, ludic, and narrative safety. Out of these three, ludic and visual safety seem to be the necessary conditions for a game to still be classified as cozy, with the lack of narrative safety allowing for the existence of other subtypes recognized within cozy games, such as empathy games – which feature difficult emotions – and dark cozy games, which feature ghosts, monsters, and other elements of Gothic and horror genres.

Cozy games

Up to this date, the most thorough analysis of the aesthetics and narrative themes characteristic to coziness comes from the abovementioned report. It introduces the concept of coziness as referring to "how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of

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[1] 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 Cook. Following the order provided on the original blog post, it is now referred to as (Short et al., 2018).

safety, abundance, and softness." The three described concepts refer to gameplay, world-building, and the audio-visual layer, that is to the game's aesthetic. In the report, safety is understood as "an absence of danger and risk" which is usually achieved through a lack of threats, time constraints, or high penalties for mistakes. Rather, the gameplay relies on exploration and includes tasks that are easy (sometimes even repetitive) but engaging enough that they are not boring or frustrating. Second, by characterizing these games through the idea of *abundance,* their goal is a "means of satisfying unmet needs." The third aspect listed in the report, softness, describes how these 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 stimuli, where players have a lower state of arousal but can still be highly engaged and present" (Short et al., 2018).

In our 2020 article on coziness, Martyna Bakun and I discussed the relationship between coziness and other game themes, identifying three types of applications of coziness in video games, depending on their function in the game as coherent, dissonant, and situational (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020). The concept of *dark cozy games* proposed in this paper corresponds the best with the second type, the dissonance, as it describes games that juxtapose with each other seemingly incompatible elements of design and narration, such as soft and non-threatening aesthetics with difficult, uncomfortable narratives or topics. Dissonant use, in which cozy and non-cozy elements such as difficult emotions (sadness or grief) or elements enticing fear (monsters and ghosts) can be juxtaposed to emphasize both through contrast, allows for perhaps the most creative use of coziness.

Dark cozy games

In this article, I focus on the instances of a specific dissonant relationship that occurs between cozy aesthetics of softness and horror narrative elements. Additionally, I consider the role of ludic safety (or lack thereof) in the discussed titles. While at the first glance the connection between horror or discomfort and cuteness seems paradoxical, the relationship between these two is stronger than one might suspect, especially when, instead of broadly understood *coziness*, one looks at two components that, while not synonymous, fall close in meaning: *cuteness* and *comfort*.

While *cuteness*, commonly understood as a quality of appearance associated with big eyes and round features, is usually not mentioned as a *separate* quality of cozy games, we instinctively tend to equate the two, even though cuteness does not have to be soft (and vice versa) – take, for example, *Animal Crossing* or *Cult of the Lamb* which, instead of typical pastel colors and low-poly graphics, feature bright colors or thick, black line art that could bring to mind certain sharpness, as

opposed to softness. Although it often describes child-like features (round faces, small bodies, big eyes) and clumsy and innocent behavior (Gn, 2016), cuteness has been long recognized for its complicated relationship to positive and negative emotions. The concept of "cute aggression," defined by Katherine Stavropoulos and Laura Alba (2018) as "the urge people get to squeeze or bite cute things, albeit without desire to cause harm" (p. 1), has drawn some attention on social media over the last years, but cuteness has also been discussed academically as a tool of consumer manipulation (Su et al., 2023) or even as a "dark pattern" in home robots design that "depriv[es] users of some degree of conscious agency at the site of interaction" (Lacey & Caudwell, 2019, p. 374). In the paper titled *Cuteness and Disgust: The Humanizing and Dehumanizing Effects of Emotion*, Gary Sherman and Jonathan Haidt (2011) analyzed the "disgust and cuteness response" arguing that "disgust shrinks the moral circle – particularly by altering motivations for social engagement and cognitive processes related to mentalizing" (pp. 245–246) while cuteness works in the opposite direction, namely, "it expands the moral circle by influencing motivations for social engagement and cognitive processes related to mentalizing", where mentalizing "refers to the process by which we perceive an agent as possessing a mind" (pp. 245–246). Although the role of disgust in this capacity has already been recognized by others (Pizarro et al., 2006), Sherman and Haidt noted that the cuteness response had not yet been well understood. However, their framing of it as a mechanism "that 'releases' sociality (e.g., play and other affiliative interactions), which sometimes (indirectly) leads to increased care" (Sherman & Haidt, 2011, p. 246).

Digital games have long utilized cute and soft aesthetics to present difficult, uncomfortable, or stressful themes. The dissonance between the content and the aesthetics framing it resulted in what has briefly been referred to as *empathy games* (Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Boltz et al., 2015; Kors et al., 2016; Pozo, 2018), though the name has been problematized ever since (Ruberg, 2020). Consider two games in which the aesthetics of softness and safety of the gameplay accompany narratives exploring nostalgia, sorrow, and grief: a cute puzzle adventure game *The Last Campfire* (Hello Games, 2021) and a more popular *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020).

The former's Steam description presents it as "a story of a lost ember trapped in a puzzling world, searching for meaning and a way home", which already hints at the tone of the game. The gameplay is intuitive enough and, at first glance, it reads as cozy with dimmed, pleasant colors and low-poly graphics. The little figure, reminiscent of the hooded, barely humanoid protagonist of thatgamecompany's *Journey* (2013), traverses what quickly becomes established as either an afterlife or some other mysterious world in-between, where the player encounters spirits of similar creatures, which got lost, were forgotten, or gave up. Thus, despite

the overwhelming cuteness and the lack of imminent threats, the game has an omnipresent ambiance of sadness, which is additionally accentuated by a slow, pensive rhythm matching the foggy aesthetic of the implied afterlife.

Spiritfarer (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020) also deals with grief, seeing the protagonists Stella and Daffodil, her cat, taking on a role of Charon tasked with helping souls of the departed to cross over by fulfilling their last wishes and helping them feel safe and cared for. The gameplay is designed in a way that keeps the player busy, making them responsible both for Charon's ship and its passengers as Stella collects ingredients and prepares meals, tends to a garden, and cultivates the relationships with the guests. At some points, the game features elements of platforming, the result of which can depend on skill but which do not allow the player to fail in a way that would stop the progress.

Arguably, it is the difference in the gameplay that additionally affects the emotional hue of the two games: *The Last Campfire*, the sadness seems to be a constant quality of the emotional environment, while in *Spiritfarer*, it is instead connected to the storylines of the specific guests. But sadness and grief have always fitted cozy aesthetics. In fact, so many cozy games take advantage of the ludic and visual safety to explore these feelings that grief- and depression-themed titles tend to be considered unquestionably cozy as long as the game satisfies the visual and/ or gameplay requirements of coziness. The need to differentiate when talking about dark cozy games appears because dark titles go against the expectation of emotional safety, allowing us to pose a question: *are dark cozy games even still cozy?*

In this sense, I use the term *dark cozy games* to describe games that, while drawing from aesthetics of coziness, borrow themes and tropes from horror and Gothic genres, but also entice some form of emotional, narrative, or ludic lack of safety. For this reason, I do not look into games that are undoubtedly cozy but borrow characters, settings, or themes from the aforementioned genres – a practice which, after all, is extremely popular in all media. This trend is also visible within coherent cozy games: it has been reported that Eric Barone, the creator of *Stardew Valley*, is currently working on another game titled *Haunted Chocolatier*, which introduces chocolate-making ghosts to the pixel graphics and cozy gameplay familiar from his first game, while another recently announced *Stardew Valley*-like game, *Grave Seasons*, will "randomly select one of [the NPCs] to be a serial killer" upon every new playthrough (Son M., 2021). While these examples show current interest in hybridization of what we recognize as cozy games, the games I refer to as *dark cozy* play with difficulty, pose challenges, or even create discomfort or fear. And so, I first look at *Cult of the Lamb*, which combines cozy and roguelike gameplay, and then compare the use of softness and ludic safety in horror *Dredge* and Gothic *Oxenfree*.

Cute ugliness and the situational safety in *Cult of the Lamb*

Cult of the Lamb makes an interesting case in regard to how it balances and juxtaposes cozy safety (emotional, visual, and ludic) with areas which turn the gameplay to the one we recognize from roguelikes, including procedurally generated dungeons, increasingly difficult opponents, and complicated bosses requiring skill to beat (or, a very low difficulty). While *Dredge* and *Oxenfree* evoke the feelings of dread and tension through the atmosphere, music, and narrative, *Cult of the Lamb* features a demonic cult, dark magic, monsters, and dark themes such as cannibalism without enticing fear in the players.

The game starts when the eponymous lamb is slaughtered as a sacrifice and then resurrected by The One Who Waits, an old god imprisoned by four monstrous Bishops. Thanks to the god's patronage, Lamb is given magical powers and missions to establish a cult devoted to them and to free the god. The two narrative tasks correspond with two vastly different gameplay experiences. On the one hand, entering the dungeons triggers roguelike parts of the game as the Lamb traverses procedurally generated maps to gather resources, gain experience, find new followers, and, finally, face the Bishops as the bosses. On the other hand, Lamb needs to establish their temple and build a village for their followers – here, the game features all the elements known from cozy farming simulator games such as growing and preparing food, building, and repairing facilities, or maintaining relationships with the villagers.

While the game's 2D design is undeniably adorable, instead of dimmed, soft colors it uses bold, bright colors and thick, dark line art. All believers are anthropomorphized creatures, both based on animals and more vaguely monstrous, and the transition from the roguelike dungeons (from where many are recruited and/or saved) to the cozy village is signaled through a visual change in design. Whereas the creatures encountered in the dungeons look a little less friendly, once indoctrinated, the followers are adorable, indeed: they have big, innocent eyes, make funny, unthreatening expressions, and offer mostly casual remarks about the quality of their lives in the village (although, occasionally, they express interest in consuming feces or feeding them to others as a prank). However, at the same time they defecate and get violently sick, and if they lose faith or want to sabotage the cult, their monstrous features show as their eyes become bloody and demonic, and their teeth – sharp. Bright red is an important color, being repeatedly used to emphasize the demonic or monstrous traits of the characters: not only is it the color of Lamb's outfit, but also their eyes will turn blood-red and wide when showing anger or scaring followers. Similarly, unless indoctrinated and loyal to Lamb and the cult, the villagers' eyes might become similarly non-human, red with black dots around them.

It is interesting to look at how cuteness and ugliness (which often denotes deformed, bulbous, and exaggerated shapes) are combined in designs of other monsters, especially the Bishops in their final boss forms, showing that cuteness does not necessarily denote coziness. Of course, the connection between cute and ugly is not unknown to 2D animation, being a staple element of such shows as Cartoon Network's *Powerpuff Girls* (McCracken, 1998–2005), *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (Dilworth, 1999–2002), or Edmund McMillen's and Florian Himsl's roguelike *Binding of Isaac* (2001). The latter game, offering a disturbing reading of the biblical story of Isaac, showing him as an abused and terrified child having to survive literal and metaphorical monsters, used a similar contrast between the grotesque and the cute in order to parallel the dissonance between the innocence of the protagonist and the horrors he had to withstand.

Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2007) argued that cuteness and monstrosity could complement and be understood through each other, which potentially explains the presence of cute monsters in popular fiction (especially in the Japanese context), as illustrated not only by *Pokémon* (Allison, 2010), which lean strongly towards the *cute* rather than *monstrous* qualities, but also the transformation of Lovecraftian fear-striking Cthulhu from a horrifying Eldritch horror to a cute creature often produced and sold as plushie, stickers, etc. (Ward, 2013). The thin line between the bodily grotesque and cuteness was also mentioned by Sharon Kinsella (1995) in the discussion of characters such as Hello Kitty and Totoro, who have "stubbly arms, no fingers, no mouths, huge heads, massive eyes – which can hide no private thoughts from the viewer – nothing between their legs, pot bellies, swollen legs, and pigeon feet . . . [and who] can't walk, can't talk, can't in fact do anything at all for themselves" (p. 236). Cuteness is, then, contextual. Taken out of context, the same attributes could be found in both what we consider cute and monstrous: depending on its interpretation, exaggeration of features associated with the cute can become terrifying (i.e., "grotesque cute" in Sato, 2009) or be understood as weakness (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2007). This is once again visible in the Japanese language, where *kawaisô* (可哀想), which is derived from *kawaii* (可愛い), means pitiable, pathetic, and poor (Kinsella, 1995; Sato, 2009).

As Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2007) further argues: "Wouldn't [Hello Kitty] be an *astoma*, a mouthless freak? Couldn't we interpret her lack of fingers (claws? hands?) as an actual sign of physical monstrosity?" (p. 219). Hello Kitty (and Totoro, and countless other cute creatures) does not evoke fear, but rather it is "the disempowering feeling of pity and sympathy (aligned though . . . to that of superiority and even certain cruelty) that deprives a monster of his monstrosity" (p. 219).

Finally, the last commentary is reflected in Emma Reay's (2021) analysis of the use of the "buoyant, giddy, cherubic figure of the 'Blithe Child'" (p. 132) in games

that construct the player-avatar relationship to resemble the one between a child and their toy. She notes a dissonance between the cuteness of the characters and the roughness of play in titles like *Fall Guys* (Media Tonic, 2020): "slippage between being 'carefree' and being 'uncaring' [as] the Blithe Child's hearty robustness not only withstands rough play but also seems to invite it" (Reay, 2021, p. 132). Thus, the games inherit "some of the more sinister dynamics latent in human-toy relationships, namely the desire to humiliate and mutilate the cute object and anxieties about what it means to be 'real'" (Reay, 2021, p. 131).

I would call *Cult of the Lamb* a true representation of a hybrid game that clearly connects elements of coziness with roguelikes and *cute ugly* design of its monsters. When considered as a whole, it seemingly does not provide ludic safety, an aspect which seems defining of coziness: the fights can be very difficult, and the themes can be dark and upsetting. However, at the same time, it offers the players a situational coziness by ensuring there are ludically safe spaces (the cult village) and further giving the player a choice of whether the cult will be benevolent (emotionally cozy) or whether it will become a cannibalistic place of dark magic and demon worship. During sermons, the players can choose one of two upgrades or perks which tilt the cult's character into one of the two directions. By choosing between various options (e.g., between Cannibal Trait or Grass Eater Trait, deciding what food will allow the cult to level up), the player shapes what beliefs the cult will have about afterlife, whether the followers will peacefully pass due to the old age or they will be ascended in a special ceremony, etc.

Is *Cult of the Lamb* cozy, then? I would argue that a more productive question is whether and how it utilizes the main aspects of cozy games such as themes (e.g., the cozy village that needs to be tended for and build), some elements of ludic safety (both through player choice and the separate areas of safety), and aesthetic (through cuteness rather than dimmed colors).

Coziness as a tool of deception in *Dredge*

For Nicole Carpenter (2023), *Dredge* is an apt example of a game illustrating the theses from the very title of her article, "Cozy Games Are Getting Darker". However, despite its skillful use of cozy aesthetics (e.g., visual softness), themes, and gameplay (fishing, narration carried through dialogue boxes), *Dredge* is undoubtedly a horror game, creating tension through music, themes, and monsters lurking in the sea at night.

In the game, the player assumes the role of the Fisherman, who arrives in a tiny, coastal town and takes up a job as a local angler. When docked at harbor, the player can interact with characters, sell fish, upgrade their gear, or fix the ship, but the majority of the game is spent at the open sea, fishing, collecting materials and lost

trinkets, and exploring. It does not take long before the Fisherman ventures out into the night and discovers that the underwater world is completely transformed in the darkness. Fish caught at night might be deformed and pulsating with purple, sinister light, but some people are willing to pay more for them for… various reasons (it probably is better not to ask). When the word gets out that the Fisherman is willing to brave the night waters, they are soon tasked with a special assignment that leads them to discovering some of the darkest parts of the ocean and its secrets.

The fact that fishing comprises almost the entirety of the gameplay is, of course, not accidental and creates the sense of coziness in the most direct way. In-game fishing, which can be a common part of both bigger, action-heavy or RPG games and smaller cozy titles, usually appears in a form of mini-games that can differ in regard to their complexity and impact on the overall narrative (Xiao, 2023), offering situational moments of meditative stillness. This is true also for fishing in *Dredge*, which divides its gameplay between areas of safety and peril as well. Where *Cult of the Lamb* did it through specific locations, here the division is marked by the time of day. The day can be beautiful and cozy, allowing the player to fish and explore at their own pace while enjoying the soft, peaceful colors of the sunsets, but nights transform these areas into quite a different place, leaving no trace of the serene landscape, becoming dark and dangerous to the point of life-threatening. While the Fisherman does not need to keep rigid sleeping hours and it is up to the player when they will rest and when they will work, staying too long outside of a dock will influence mental health, raising the panic-meter and causing the vision to become blurry and distorted to the point of hallucinating.

If we consider ludic safety one of the dominant qualities of coziness, one may argue that neither *Cult of the Lamb* nor *Dredge* fully classify. Unlike *Animal Crossing*, failure is not impossible, and the gameplay can become quite stressful and intense, rather than mellow and relaxing. However, that is not to say that these two games are as difficult or unforgiving as some of the mainstream action-heavy titles: the former allows the players to adjust the difficulty setting to the point where deaths could be a rarity, and for the majority of the latter, the monsters can be strategically avoided. What is the most defining difference between the two games is the emotions they aim to create: only *Dredge* aims at creating a sense of dread. Perhaps this makes it qualify more as a *cozy dark game* rather than the other way around.

Soft ghosts of *Oxenfree*

Finally, although it might seem the most controversial, I would place *Oxenfree*[2] in between the other two titles, showing that despite its Gothic themes, the aesthetics of safety are prevailing enough for the game to balance out both sides, the cozy and the dark. The game follows Alex, who together with her friends arrives at Edward Island only to find out that it is, indeed, haunted. Soon, they start receiving strange, glitchy messages on the radio and witness the opening of an interdimensional rift resulting in a time loop, telekinetic events, and, of course, even more ghosts.

Unlike *Dredge*, the game does not use coziness to lure the player into a sense of safety, and it is clear from the beginning what kind of a story one should expect. However, the aesthetics of *Oxenfree* are also characterized by softness, roundness, and certain simplicity of shapes, visible particularly through the design of the characters who appear small enough that there is no need to render details of their faces. The action takes place mostly in the woods and around the small town, and, faithfully to the requirements of the genre of Gothic, everything is softened by the mist. The colors are murky and dim, but they are not dark enough to be terrifying, but instead they look beautiful, intriguing, or even sublime.

Secondly, unlike both previously discussed games, *Oxenfree's* gameplay is consistent throughout the entire game. There are no spaces that are less or more safe. It features point-and-click mechanics and relies heavily on dialogue, offering the player a choice out of three possible speech bubbles corresponding to specific buttons. While the choice is not exactly a quick time event, there is a limited window during which a decision must be made, with the silence making a fourth option to which the NPCs will respond. Thus, the player is shielded from the experiences of the characters, being able to slow down, explore in their own rhythm, or even stop the play without pausing the game: left to their own devices in the middle of the path, the characters will not venture away nor will they be attacked. The focus on the narrative, the slow pace, and the partial control of when the events will be triggered does create a sense of ludic safety that the other two games are lacking.

Dark cozy games or cozy horror?

There is no doubt that cozy games are evolving, which in turn means that more scrutiny should be placed on what we really understand by *coziness*. Understanding coziness as relational to other types of content, we have allowed the definition of

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[2]   Due to the space limits, I only focus on the first of the two games. However, considering the design similarities between the first (2016) and the second (2023) games in the series, the analysis can pertain to both.

a cozy game to be broadened and stretched. In this sense, *dark cozy game* could describe games that balance dark themes such as those known from Gothic and horror genres with elements of coziness, but that also raises the question: how far one can push that relationship until the game cannot be considered cozy anymore, but rather becomes a game that utilizes certain cozy elements?

I took a glance at three games that, to a varying degree, try to balance out two seemingly contradictory aesthetics: that of safety and softness with the one of fear and tension. All three games balance on the edges of coziness, with varying strength of the connection to the original understanding of a *cozy game*. All three play with fear and discomfort as representative of Gothic (*Oxenfree*) and horror (*Cult of the Lamb* and *Dredge*). They all also feature elements of cozy aesthetics: softness of shapes either in 2D (*Cult of the Lamb*) or low-poly 3D style (*Dredge* and *Oxenfree*); dimmed, pastel colors (*Dredge* and *Oxenfree*); and cute characters (*Cult of the Lamb*). Despite their narratives, they offer safety on the ludic level, either in a way that can be considered coherent (*Oxenfree*) or situational (*Cult of the Lamb* and *Dredge*).

The distinction proposed in the title for these conclusions is, admittedly, a playful one, meant to provoke a reflection rather than bring definitive answers. As a subtype that will be positioned on the intersection of cozy and not-cozy (in the broadest sense), it perhaps does not matter whether a game is a cozy game that introduces elements of horror, or a horror game that utilizes coziness, be it to manipulate the players, to strengthen the impact of the non-cozy elements, or to introduce a demanding genre to new audiences. The existence of such hybrid categories is, on the other hand, fascinating for the future discussion of what elements are crucial for one to recognize a specific title as cozy.

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Negotiating Anthropocentrism and Ecologies in Cozy Games

Abstract

As we sit at the precipice of this planet's sixth mass extinction event, we need to use every tool at our disposal to advocate for our ecologies. Human self-interest and anthropocentric thinking act as barriers to communicating ecocrisis. Cozy video games can create safe spaces to explore the ecological effects of human actions with the aim of prompting reflection and action on environmental issues. Drawing on ecocritical video game scholarship, the aim of this article is to explore the ways in which environments are represented and interacted with in selected cozy video games. Through an examination of the extractivist colonial processes and narratives of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, in contrast with the complex ecocritical coziness of *Terra Nil*, this article posits that cozy games have the potential to achieve effective environmental communication. Both *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Terra Nil* successfully empower the player to shape their environment but only *Terra Nil* affords ecological empowerment. By creating a safe space to engage with environments and even ecocrisis, cozy games allow players the agency to construct their own econarratives and may challenge or perpetuate anthropocentric ideas about the environment.

Keywords: cozy games, ecocriticism, extractivism, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Terra Nil*

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As we sit at the precipice of this planet's sixth mass extinction event, we need to use every tool at our disposal to advocate for our ecologies. One of the greatest barriers to achieving effective environmental communication is the dissonance created by the gradual creep of ecological catastrophe, what Rob Nixon (2011) calls the *slow violence* of climate change as it "occurs gradually and out of sight", unlike the "explosive and spectacular" violence of other catastrophes (p. 2). So, what can we do as storytellers and communicators to bridge this gap in understanding through video games?

The slow and contemplative nature of cozy video games presents an opportunity for reflection on the player's place within the ecology. Cozy games, much like the slow creep of ecological crisis, may not be "explosive and spectacular", but they often present a safe space for building relationships with in-game environments, even though some approach this in a more nuanced and considered way than others. The goal of this article is to discuss games in which the player is invited to take on a stewardship role over an environment and aims to show the different meanings and ecological implications ascribed to the player's actions.

As a mode of analysis, ecocriticism examines the ecological representation and implications of media with a "triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world" (Heise, 2006, p. 506). When applied to video games, ecocriticism often involves the analysis of narrative messages that convey the eco-ideology of a given game or selection of games. It also may examine what ideologies are reinforced by the practices and processes the player is expected to enact. To inform my ecocritical approach I will be drawing from Alenda Chang's *Playing Nature* (2019), which examines the overlap between overt and implied environmental discourse and the affordances of video games as a complex, multilayered medium.

Kyle Bohunicky (2014) posits that "nature and discourse are co-constituted through writers and writing", likening written composition to the video game player's agency to shape and interact with ecologies (p. 221). This agency allows the player to compose their own econarratives and engage in ecocritical discourse through their interactions with "the rocks, trees, dirt, water and biological matter", with Bohunicky referring to this digital symbolic rendering of materials as "discursive matter" (p. 222). The ability to manipulate the aforementioned "discursive matter" is evident in the games discussed in this article through terraforming and cultivation. To view the shaping of ecologies in cozy games as discourse allows insight into the ways in which video game discourse about ecologies, and player perception of ecologies, interact and influence each other.

In order to define cozy games and their conventions, I will be referring to the aesthetics outlined by Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020) in "Towards

the aesthetics of cozy video games". According to them, coziness involves safety and offers the player a sense of stability which can be achieved through a transition from disorder to order, as demonstrated in the successful cozy video games *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021) and *Cats Organized Neatly* (DU&I, 2020), both allowing players to create order from disorder through puzzle solving.

I turn to cozy games to observe how they deal with the tension between the aesthetics of safety and the reality of the ecologies they represent, focusing on two main examples. Through examinations of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) and *Terra Nil* (Free Lives, 2023) I hope to identify the ecological narratives and processes that shape the player's interactions with nature in the game space. The first game was chosen primarily for its widespread cultural impact, whereas *Terra Nil,* which has enjoyed a more modest success, was selected as a unique example that subverts the anthropocentrism of popular cozy games.

The colonialist extractivism of cozy games

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (*ACNH*) is one of the most successful and recognizable examples of a cozy game with scholarship that backs up its relevance to ecocritical discourse in video games (Coroller & Flinois, 2023; Navarro-Remesal, 2019; Smith, 2022). Through a brief ecocritical survey of academic sources, both directly addressing the game and tangentially focusing on the narrative concerns and procedural rules of the game space, it is possible to sketch out the dominant discourses of ecology in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and games with similar econarratives and processes.

As with previous installments of the *Animal Crossing* series, in *New Horizons* the player is tricked into purchasing the home, which they have just established, from Tom Nook. Although Tom Nook has been called "a condensation of the corporate bourgeoisie" (Bogost, 2008, p. 119), it is his colonial values and practices that are the primary focus of this examination. Colonialism, as examined closely by the postcolonial scholars Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015), tethers colonial and imperial practices to narratives of domination over ecologies and people that facilitate environmental devastation. This colonialist process of controlling the politics and land of another country is exemplified in the practices of Nook Inc., Nook's company, which appears to have complete political and economic control over the island.

Nook's influence over the land can be read in terms of replacement of established ecologies in favor of cultivated, curated, and contained nature. In discussing the colonialist replacement of indigenous or endemic ecologies with sanctioned and familiar plants and animals Huggan and Tiffin (2015) note that "imports to the newly settled colonies – humans, animals, plants – were regarded . . . as necessary

and 'natural' impositions on, or substitutes for, the local bush or wilderness" (p. 7). This persistent ideology is reflected in the practices and processes undertaken in *ACNH*. Rather than coexisting with the endemic environment, the player is incentivized to alter the island through challenges, tasks, and island ratings. Certain functions of the game, such as stores with increased variety of purchasable products and homes for new villagers, are unlocked through the exploitation and alteration of the environment.

Extractivism, understood as processes and ideologies that facilitate anthropocentric and unsustainable resource extraction (Acosta, 2013), is evident in the mechanics and narrative of *ACNH*. The game tasks the player with "improving" an island, chopping down trees, mining, establishing human infrastructure, harvesting fruit, establishing new plant varieties, and even terraforming. The player must damage or destroy elements of the environment in order to gain resources for crafting and achieve the game's goals. The removal of weeds, which are in the in-game ecology *before* the player's arrival and which are potentially endemic, is essential to achieving many goals throughout the game.

One of the most troubling examples of exploitation and extractivism in *ACNH* is the mechanic allowing one to travel to the other islands in order to strip them of their resources. For the escapade to be the most efficient, players should ensure that they have nothing in their pockets apart from the required tools before heading to the island. On arrival players likely engage in chopping down trees, mining rocks, collecting rare species, and return to their island with full pockets, leaving the other island bare. All for the low-cost of 2000 Nook Miles, one of the forms of in-game currency. There are no repercussions for this: in fact, the practice is encouraged to compensate for the loss of biodiversity on the player's own island due to urbanization and extractivist processes. These resource islands harken back to Huggan and Tiffin's (2015) explanation of colonialist approaches: "Such places, after all, were apparently untamed, unowned and, above all, unused; and, accordingly, settlers set about rendering them productive and profitable" (p. 7). The islands devoid of player interference and exploitation are not being used to their full potential according to the colonialist and extractivist ideology of *ACNH*.

Another element of the colonialist approach to the environment depicted in *ACNH* is the process of curation and symbolic conservation. *ACNH* creates a hierarchy of living creatures based on their anthropocentric value. "Hierarchy" as used in this article, and in ecocritical discourse generally, refers to the human conceptualization of nature according to the identification of humans "within a broader circle of living things" (Marland, 2013, p. 850). Animals with aesthetic and sentimental value, such as the anthropomorphic animals that inhabit the islands as villagers, are given special status and treated as accessories or collectables for the player's island. Conversely, as Eric Van Ooijen (2018) notes,

fish can be killed and consumed; "even «friendly» games, that set out to avoid violence against animals, tend to construct classes of certain animal species as open to killing" (p. 179). The relationship between the treatment and categorization of animals and anthropocentric attitudes is highlighted in the results of Manh-Toan Ho et al. (2022) examination of *ACNH,* in which "the frequency of catching fish and insects is correlated with more favorable attitudes toward human dominion" and "players behave with a sense of superiority over other animals, especially insects", associating this with positive perceptions of anthropocentrism (p. 2304).

In this example of commercially dominant cozy games, the player engages in anthropocentric coziness, which grants them a complete control over their environment and allows them to indulge in the fantasy of a world in which there is ecological safety and stability. This aligns with Waszkiewicz and Bakun's (2020) model of cohesive relationships between cozy aesthetics and a cozy message, engaging with an outdated agrarian fantasy in which the island is untouched by the outside world and unaffected by many of the daily stressors of urban living. As Sydney Crowley notes in an analysis of *Stardew Valley* (Concerned Ape, 2016), games which indulge in simplistic fantasies of attaining real estate avoid the discourse of critical agrarianism and the reality of land acquisition (Crowley, 2023). By acquiring the island via an interest free loan from Nook Inc., the player does not have to grapple with the reality of purchasing property, instead focusing on the neoliberal agenda of constant asset improvement and profitability. This is done without corresponding ecological damage or improvement. By limiting the player's agency in exploitation or rejuvenation, cozy games can create a "mesocosm" or an isolated representation of an ecology (Chang, 2019, p. 17) in which environmentalist rhetoric is minimized (Crowley, 2023). This, in turn, might be the very key to the coziness of *ACNH* as it reduces risk and minimizes the demands on the player's attention. By providing the safe and secure space of the isolated island environment, *ACNH* allows the player to live out a narrative ostensibly immersed in nature and disconnected from the rat-race of capitalist modern society.

Despite the ostensive immersion in nature, firmly entrenched anthropocentric ideologies remain with priority given to the anthropomorphized island residents. All non-anthropomorphic animals can be taken from their environment and displayed as live specimens in the museum by the curator, Blathers. In the creation of his exhibitions, Blathers represents problematic behavior which prioritizes animals that are visually appealing and conform to public-friendly narratives of idyllic nature – what Ursula Heise terms (2019) "flagship species" (p. 60). If the player wants to see this in action, they need only present a less visually appealing insect to Blathers and watch him sweat due to his extreme aversion to these species. He terms these animals to be "wretched creature[s]", rather than lauding

them as valid examples of the ecosystem, as he does with others. Heise (2019) discusses the danger of reductive and synecdochic depictions of nature, which may skew conservation efforts and resources away from important elements of the environment.

Regardless of the issues raised thus far, Víctor Navarro-Remesal (2019) identifies *ACNH* as a game that "include[s] complex ecosystems where elements are connected in a network of interdependency and relations of care" (p. 14). Furthermore, he points to "ten wide conceptual categories" of representation of nature in video games, the most pertinent of which for the purposes of an examination of *ACNH* is "care for the environment [which] predominates especially in the games that, in a more or less realistic way, simulate rural life" (p. 19). Meanwhile *Terra Nil* demonstrates the importance of the category of "videogames of ecological denunciation" (p. 21) which have the explicit goal of ecocritical discourse.

The complex coziness of *Terra Nil*

While usage of the anthropocentric model of ecological hierarchy can be harmful, other games employ categorization to facilitate an understanding of complex ecologies. By breaking down the processes of revitalizing a post-apocalyptic world into manageable steps they become more accessible, but in the process of doing so, they fail to reflect the complexity and challenges of reviving a lost ecosystem. Despite the simplification of the process of revitalization, *Terra Nil* represents ecologies with a far greater complexity than *ACNH*. As a mesocosm, *Terra Nil* provides the player with broader ecological agency than the previously examined *ACNH*. It rejects the idea that the best improvements that can be made to an ecology are human-centered, while still engaging with a fantasy of order and transformation.

Terra Nil is a god-view simulation game that presents the player with the challenge of rehabilitating a series of lifeless wastelands into thriving environments. The player must recycle the artefacts of human intervention into a vehicle to evacuate, thus leaving the planet to exist without humans. Through a process of introducing advanced technologies to purify water, reseed the land, cultivate sea biomes etc., then dismantling those technologies once they serve their regenerative purpose, the player engages in a disanthropic fantasy of returning the environment to a pre-Anthropocene state. The game starts with a book of instructions that guide the player through the navigation and rejuvenation of ecosystems with the goal of rehabilitating ecologies across the globe. At the beginning of the game, the encountered environments are barren wastelands with no signs of life, but with plenty of proof of contamination. Starting with a landscape that is bare, rather than one destroyed and exploited by humans, protects the players from

cognitive guilt and anxiety that one might experience when confronted with a post-apocalyptic setting. This deftly sidesteps one of the key barriers to climate communication highlighted by Susanne Moser (2010); the conflict between the self-interest of humanity, that is convenience and comfort, and ecological action (p. 36). The player is not asked to make choices or navigate human considerations, but to simply revive an abandoned and barren post-apocalyptic landscape, devoid of humans entirely.

The abandoned cities and urban spaces are *not* introduced until the final stages of *Terra Nil*. These spaces come with their own specific challenges such as radiation, ground instability and buildings that take up space which on other maps would be available to restore biomes. In response to this, *Terra Nil* offers some innovative solutions; sunflowers can be planted on nuclear waste sites, skyscrapers make excellent structures for bamboo forests, and radiation fans are used to minimize radioactive contamination. It is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a 0 CPM (counts per minute) radioactivity, but it is nonetheless a comforting idea that technology may be used to deal with the aftermath of ecocrisis. The idealized notion that technology can solve environmental destruction is problematized by Megan Condis, who deems solutions through "techno-fixes" as "impossible" due to the demand for continued growth driven by capitalism and consumerism. As such, these "techno-fixes" in games represent a reassuring vision of a world that runs contrary to observed patterns of human societal organization (Condis, 2020).

The omission of explicit evidence of human contamination in the early parts of the game appears to be a necessary concession to the coziness of the game, allowing *Terra Nil* to address heavy environmental issues without encountering reflexive resistance from players who may find the environmental consequences stemming from human exploitation confronting. This goes with Waszkiewicz and Bakun's ideas about dissonant relationships between aesthetics and the content of the game: "where cozy aesthetics are employed in order to introduce difficult themes" (2020, p. 233). Waszkiewicz and Bakun discuss this dissonance in terms of mental health struggles and marginalized communities, and I would extend this dissonance to games that deal with ecocrisis. Not only are these issues intersecting – see the prevalence of eco-anxiety in "specific vulnerable groups, including young people, Indigenous groups, and those connected to the natural world" (Coffey et al., 2021, p. 4) – but environmental crisis presents its own uncomfortable communication challenges, as it lacks the "certainty and immediacy" of "other, more familiar problems" (Moser, 2010, pp. 31–32).

Whereas *ACNH* adheres to conventions of coherent coziness, *Terra Nil* brings in elements of dissonance through the imagery of the wasteland or contamination, more akin to the post-apocalyptic than cozy utopian narratives and aesthetics.

Through this, *Terra Nil* is able to make the devastating specter of ecological crisis less existentially threatening to the player. The complexity of the ecological issues that are presented to the player does not, of course, reflect the complexity of ecologies and the impact of human actions, but it does offer a more complex depiction of ecologies than simple representations of contamination and hotter climates; the extremities of the barren wasteland maps have different properties, climates, and humidity levels. The player must rejuvenate such environments as river valleys and desolate fjords that have different attributes, potential biomes, and fauna. Thus, the player must adapt their strategies when approaching specific environments.

The comfort and security afforded by familiar-looking human technologies used to kickstart the rejuvenation process in *Terra Nil* offers hope that scientific endeavors and human progress will eventually become a force for ecological healing rather than harm. Despite this reliance on human technology, in *Terra Nil* the goal is to utilize the engineering feats of the late Anthropocene to make a self-sustaining ecology that no longer needs human intervention to thrive. In fact, in the "winning state" of this game there is little to no evidence of humans whatsoever, with the aim to prioritize the welfare of the planet ahead of anthropocentric concerns. But where is the comfort and coziness in a game where we are burning the safety of anthropocentrism to the ground and destabilizing human exceptionalism?

This is where I have to adjust the definition of coziness discussed by Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020). In a report published by Tanya X. Short and others (2018), coziness is defined by safety, abundance, and security, all of which are denied to the generations facing ecological disaster. So, in this instance, safety means granting the planet a future. Rather than an abundance of resources the player is given tools to address one of the key sources of stress and anxiety in this time of ecological uncertainty: the player can turn back the clock and enact the change that is needed to combat the looming ecocrisis. By presenting a way to fight that ecological anxiety, *Terra Nil* offers a security that other simulation games do not.

What about the visual softness? While the colors are increasingly vibrant and pleasing as the world recovers, one could say that the isometric, god-like viewpoint and semi-realistic maps work against the aforementioned definition of coziness. This is where the transformative nature of *Terra Nil* shines through, with the rejuvenating effects of player intervention creating the softness in style and beauty that we associate with coziness. It starts from the reality of the colonial and capitalist improvements of other games and shows an alternative, a way of being with nature that is so often neglected by anthropocentric video games. A notable point of differentiation from *ACNH* is the lack of individual avatar, which could be interpreted as the need for collective action, indicating that the work that needs to be done is on such a scale that a single human could not achieve it. This disembodied

perspective may be the means of affording the player the god-like agency they need to effect change and see the cause and effect of their actions. However, with specific reference to simulation games, Chang (2019) notes that this god-view and supreme agency generally have the effect of minimizing the collective action to achieve change and amplify the human ability to manipulate the biosphere providing the freedom to conduct "benign alteration and malicious destruction" (p. 203).

Terra Nil also represents ecologies with far greater complexity than *ACNH*. This is where hierarchy, categorization, and synecdoche come into play through symbolic representations of ecologies that translate their complexity into an understandable network of ecological cause and effect. For example, in order to introduce fauna, the player must first create appropriate biomes, which in turn can only be developed by rehabilitating and terraforming the wasteland. As the world gradually begins to heal, the focus shifts from simple greenery to complex climates capable of fostering diverse flora and fauna. While the representation of nature is necessarily reductive in order to make it manageable for the player, it still provides the narrative and practice to support environmentalist rhetoric. Bohunicky (2014) notes that the player does not disappear when entering the digital world, just as their actions in the digital space are not immaterial or irrelevant. While *Terra Nil* foregoes many of the challenges of production and the impact of labor, it does highlight some elements of waste and resource management. For example, in order to leave the area that the player has been working on, they need to dismantle the equipment they have used to restore and reinvigorate the ecosystem to build a vehicle, performing the familiar actions of reusing and recycling that are one of the foundations of grass roots environmentalism.

Perhaps the most potent and hopeful example of *Terra Nil*'s ecocritical potential comes after the player has achieved the goals posed at each level. By then, they have restored biomes, repopulated the environment with animals, and removed as much evidence as possible of human interference. It is at this point, after the player's reconstituted ship takes flight to leave the ecosystem, that the player is presented with two options. They can either choose "continue" to move on to the next environmental puzzle, or they can select "appreciate', which gives them time and space for reflection in this revitalized ecological space, no longer able to intervene, interfere, or control any elements within. The "appreciate" option triggers an animation in which the camera pans across the biomes the player has restored, zooming in to observe smaller details such as a turtle shuffling across a sandy beach or a polar bear rubbing its back happily on an ice flow. These small moments to observe and reflect on the aesthetic pleasure that is the result of the player's strategic puzzle solving are crucial, not just to *Terra Nil*'s status as a cozy game, but also as a game that promotes ecological responsibility and interconnectedness. It allows the player to meditate on the cause and effect of

environmental factors, partially addressing one of Moser's hurdles to climate change communication: "delayed or absent gratification for taking action" (2010, p. 34) by rewarding the player with an aesthetically pleasing and cerebrally gratifying reward for their efforts and applying their problem-solving skills within the rules of the game space.

Conclusion

This article does not exhaust the problem of ecocriticism in cozy video games, particularly the implications of non-human player-characters for the depiction of ecologies. Here, I have limited my discussion to games that focus on human relationships with environments when a human plays a role of caretaker. The level of agency and linearity varies here, as *ACNH* offers extractivist approaches to ecologies, and *Terra Nil* provides a complex strategic toolbox for rehabilitating and rewilding the ecology. Both games successfully empower the player to shape their environment but only one affords ecological empowerment.

While cozy video games have the ability to transport us to alternate realities, distant from the ecological concerns of our time, it does not have to be that way. *Terra Nil* is by no means the perfect implementation of coziness as a means of environmentalist rhetoric, but it demonstrates the potential of ecological awareness and agency in cozy video games. Rather than denying the realities of the Anthropocene it engages with the concerns of a society that faces uncertainty and change.

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