Replay

The Polish Journal of Game Studies

RePlay

The Polish Journal of Game Studies

Dominika Staszenko-Chojnacka – Uniwersytet Łódzki, Wydział Filologiczny
Katedra Nowych Mediów i Kultury Cyfrowej, 90-236 Łódź, ul. Pomorska 171/173

Spis treści/Contents

Kelly Boudreau* ⓘD

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

Abstract

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

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

—
* Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, e-mail: kboudreau@harrisburgu.edu, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8117-6662

Introduction

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

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

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

Defining cozy games

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methods, games and theoretical frame

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Interactivity-as-demand theory

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

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

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

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

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

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

The demands on players and player-characters in cozy games

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

Cognitive demand

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

In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, the information which the player is expected to remember and call upon is saved in an inventory shown as the interface of a mobile phone. Each icon presents the player with different game content including, but not limited to, the camera, DYI recipes, Critterpedia (an inventory of all the creatures that can be collected during gameplay), and an island designer app that enables players to terraform the land. There is no need to remember any of the information required to play, design, and navigate the game world: it is presented to the player in simple, easy to understand images and texts, readily available only a few clicks away.
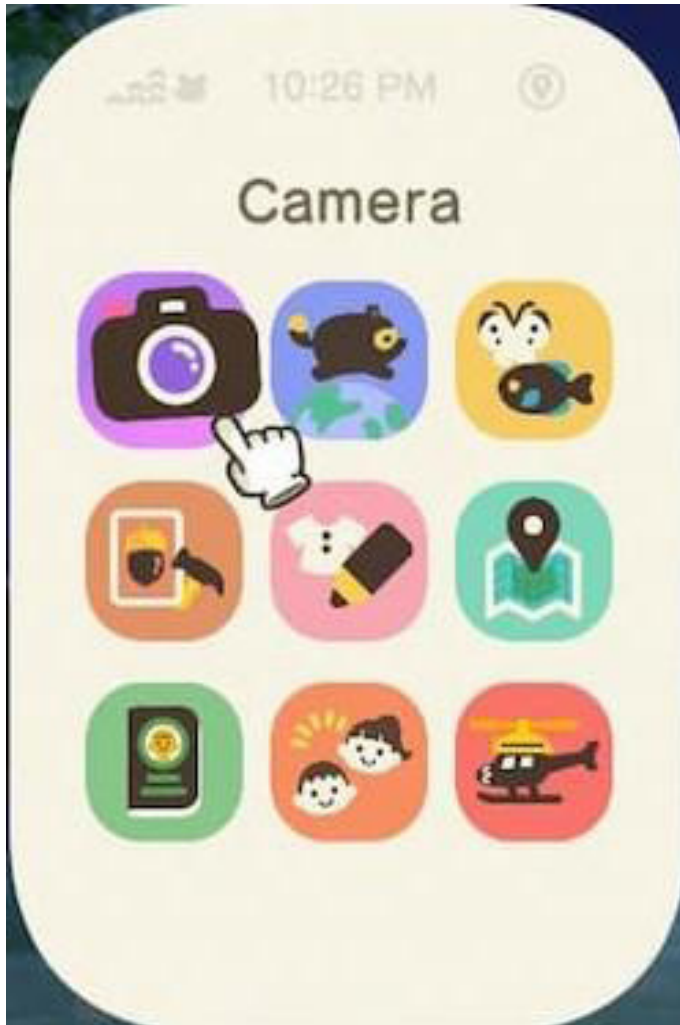
Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 4 Nook Phone Applications

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

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

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

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

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

Physical demand

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

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

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

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 7 Power up fruit meter

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

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

Emotional demand

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

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

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

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

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

Social demand

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

Bibliography

Bellingham, H. (2022, July 16). Cozy Gaming: Why a wholesome trend became a recognized genre. *Games Radar*. https://www.gamesradar.com/cozy-gaming-why-a-wholesome-trend-became-a-recognized-genre/

Belman, J. (2014). Game Elements: The Language of Values. In: M. Flanagan & H. Nissenbaum (Eds.), *Values at play in digital games* (pp. 33–72). MIT Press.

Boudreau, K. (2012). *Between Play and Design: the emergence of hybrid-identity in single-player videogames* (Publication No. NR79156) [doctoral dissertation, Université de Montréal]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Boudreau, K. (2019). Beyond Fun: Transgressive gameplay, toxic & problematic behaviour as boundary keeping. In: K. Jørgensen & F. Karlsen (Eds.), *Transgressions in Games and Play Anthology* (pp. 257–271). MIT Press.

Bowman, N.D. (2018). The demanding nature of video game play. In: N.D. Bowman (Ed.), *Video Games: A medium that demands our attention* (pp. 1–24). Routledge.

Bowman, N.D. (2019). Video games as demanding technologies. *Media and Communication*, *7*(4), 144–148.

Bowman, N.D. (2021). Interactivity as demand: Implications for interactive media entertainment. In: P. Vorderer & C. Klimmt (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory* (pp. 647–670). Oxford University Press.

Calleja, G. (2011). *In-game: From immersion to incorporation*. MIT Press.

Consalvo, M., & Paul, C.A. (2019). *Real games: What's legitimate and what's not in contemporary videogames*. MIT Press.

Cowley, B., Charles, D., Black, M., & Hickey, R. (2008). Toward an understanding of flow in video games. *Computers in Entertainment (CIE)*, *6*(2), 1–27.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.

Ćwil, M., & Howe, W.T. (2020). Cross-cultural analysis of gamer identity: A comparison of the United States and Poland. *Simulation & Gaming*, *51*(6), 785–801.

Guajardo, A. (2022). Animal Crossing. In: B. Perron, K. Boudreau, M.J. Wolf, & D. Arsenault (Eds.), *Fifty key video games* (pp. 21–26). Routledge: New York.

Hunicke, R. (2005). The case for dynamic difficulty adjustment in games. *Proceedings of the 2005 ACM SIGCHI International Conference on Advances in computer entertainment technology*, 429–433. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/1178477.1178573

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004). MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research. *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*. https://aaai.org/papers/ws04-04-001-mda-a-formal-approach-to-game-design-and-game-research/

Jiang, C., Kundu, A., & Claypool, M. (2020). Game Player Response Times versus Task Dexterity and Decision Complexity. *Extended Abstracts of the 2020 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 277–281. https://doi.org/10.1145/3383668.3419891

Klevjer, R. (2022). *What is the avatar? Fiction and embodiment in avatar-based singleplayer computer games*. transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.

Moris, S. (2023, April 20). What are cozy games and which are the best ones? *Evening Standard*. https://www.standard.co.uk/tech/gaming/cosy-games-best-genre-animal-crossing-stardew-valley-b1056844.html (accessed on June 7, 2023).

Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T., & Stratemeyer, M. (2017). What is a true gamer? The male gamer stereotype and the marginalization of women in video game culture. *Sex Roles*, *76*(7–8), 421–435. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0678-y

Phelps, A., Consalvo, M., & Bowman, N. (2021) Streaming Into the Void: An Analysis of Microstreaming Trends and Behaviors Utilizing a Demand Framework. *Proceedings of the 54th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2863–2872. http://hdl.handle.net/10125/70963

Short, T.X., Ordon, A., Hurd, D., Howe, C., Forbes, J., Eiserloh, S., Diaz, J., Cook, D., & Meiners, R. (2018, January 24). Cozy games. *Lostgarden*. https://lostgarden.home.blog/2018/01/24/cozy-games/

Strampe, L. (2024, January 23). The Best Cozy Games. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/gallery/best-cozy-games/

Tamanaha, E. (2022, May 16). My Top 15 Cozy Games. *Medium*. https://medium.com/@erinatamanaha/my-top-15-cozy-games-to-cure-a-40-hour-workweek-97657c55e394

Waszkiewicz, A., & Bakun, M. (2020). Towards the aesthetics of cozy video games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *12*(3), 225–240.

Ludography

Henchman & Goon. (2018). *Pode* [Nintendo Switch]. Henchman & Goon.
Nintendo EDP. (2020). *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [Nintendo Switch]. Nintendo.
Robinson-Yu, A. (2020). *A Short Hike* [Nintendo Switch]. Nintendo.
Team Ico (2005). *Shadow of Colossus* [Playstation 2]. Sony Computer Entertainment

Kelly Boudreau, PhD is an Associate Professor of Interactive Media Theory and Design at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, USA. With a background in sociology, film studies, and games studies, her research focuses on digital games, game design, sociality of players/avatars, and the social construction of toxic and problematic player behavior in digital games.

Tomasz Gnat* iD

Looking for Cosy in All the Wrong Places. Cosiness and Tamed Sublime of *No Man's Sky*

Abstract

In this article, I argue that some games may elicit cosy sentiments even if they are centred on a premise not usually associated with cosiness – for example the infinity of the universe. They do so not by a fluke, and cosy spaces in these games do not only appear as designated spaces apart. Evoking a cosy feeling is done by specific game mechanics or design choices, "taming" the sublime premise of the game discussed. The architecture and mechanics of this unexpected cosiness may offer a new look at the fringe cases of cosy aesthetics, perhaps broadening the understanding of this phenomenon.

Keywords: game studies, cosy, sublime, retrofuturism, spatial aesthetic

Tanya X. Short et al. (2018) posit that cosiness in interactive entertainment "refers to how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness." These three characteristics have usual connotations of intimate, human, homely spaces, emphasised by Short's consequent choice of examples. Among them are the pastoral landscapes from *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), enclosed safety zones as seen in some interior scenes in *Undertale* (Fox, 2015), lived-in

---

*   University of Silesia in Katowice, e-mail: tomasz.gnat@us.edu.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9740-8314

architectures of *Terraria* (Re-Logic, 2011), and soft materiality of *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014).

These are some of the most common tropes of cosy aesthetics. However, in this article, I argue that some games may elicit cosy sentiments even if they are centred on a premise not commonly associated with cosiness – the infinity of the universe. The archetypal representation of cosmos in games[1] is built around a sublime aesthetic, which arguably can be perceived as not cosy, or even anti-cosy. Here, I want to focus specifically on three aspects – the military/scientific aesthetic of technology (technological sublime), the vastness of the cosmos (mathematical sublime), as well as typical conflict-focused game loops (gaming sublime and stuplimity).

No Man's Sky (Hello Games, 2016)[2] is an action-adventure survival game. Instead of a linear narrative, the game focuses on the free exploration of a procedurally generated open-world, while providing certain general goals which players may, but do not have to, pursue. Players can visit planets, discover new species, gather resources, establish bases, engage in space battles, and ground combat with hostile creatures and robotic sentinels. The specifics of combat mechanics, the variety of weapons and upgrades, and the nature of encounters may vary depending on the player's choices, upgrades, and the randomly generated aspects of the game. The game does indeed seem to be built to evoke sublime feelings, but I would posit that it restructures them so the resulting experience can be interpreted as cosy. The architecture and mechanics of this unexpected cosiness may offer a new look at the fringe cases of cosy aesthetics, perhaps broadening the understanding of this phenomenon.

Sublime in science-fiction cosy games

First, it is necessary to define the non-conventional spaces for cosiness. As per Short et al.'s (2018) assertion, "[c]oziness depends on where the player is coming from when they interact with your game." Henry Jenkins suggests that "narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make a hypothesis about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 10). Because of that, the non-conventional may be subjective. Short et al. (2018) note that "a player who sees their universe as inherently about the competition may find a game with meditative

---

1   Among many examples we may note games new and old – from *Wing Commander: Privateer* (Origin Systems, 1993) and *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003), through *Elite Dangerous* (Frontier Dev UK, 2015), *X4: Foundations* (Egosoft, 2018), to the yet to be finished *Star Citizen* (Cloud Imperium Games, TBA)

2   Subsequently referred to as *NMS*.

gardening oppressive or boring." However, "[g]ame designers have developed a variety of kludges which allow them to prompt players or steer them towards narratively salient space" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 10). Consequently, we can describe certain spaces as more and less conducive towards eliciting cosiness. That is after all one of the main points in Short et al.'s report – it can be viewed as describing the methodology of establishing just such spaces.

Within the academic context, Short et al.'s (2018) work is further developed by Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020), who propose three ways in which a cosy aesthetic may function in relation to other themes present. Coherent type is a harmonious co-existence of cosy aesthetic and game functions, while situational type describes a metaphorical or literal safe space in a game that is otherwise focused on non-cosy functions. The final type is a dissonant application, where a cosy theme clashes with or is subverted by other functions of the game. Although the latter type might seem the most apt for describing *NMS*, I intend to focus mainly on the first type, pointing out specifically how that harmonious co-existence of elements can break away from conventional representations. This differs from dissonant cosy games in which the aesthetic in question is used to create or strengthen the feeling of sublime or uncanny causing increased player's distress or even "extreme discomfort" (Smith, 2012). The premise suggests cosiness, which becomes deconstructed the further we go into the game. That seems to be the case in both examples mentioned by Waszkiewicz and Bakun – *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012) and *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017). The pitfalls of incorporating the dissonant application are perhaps best visible in the example of *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games, 2021), as discussed by Sullivan, Stanfill, and Salter (2023, p. 8):

> [t]he demands for 'cosiness' risk restricting the capacity for meaningful design and threaten to impose restrictions on genres for growth and experimentation. The reception of *Boyfriend Dungeon* has been noted by games journalists as a warning to other developers that 'cosy' and 'wholesome' games carry certain expectations.

Nonetheless, I would posit that cosy dissonance in these games is not applied in the same fashion in *NMS*. Here, the process seems to run towards the opposite end of the experiential axis – from the sublime, non-conventional place for cosy, towards establishing a cosy space. This observation is going to be further developed subsequently.

First, however, we need to establish what is to be understood as a non-conventional cosy premise. Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) reiterate Short et al.'s (2018) observations that cosy games can be characterised by three tenets – safety, abundance and softness. Conventional places for cosiness seem to encompass the homely architectures mentioned in the introduction. Enclosed, but not

claustrophobic spaces, built to a human scale, understandable in their purpose and materiality. Following this line of reasoning, non-cosy games are those which to some extent subvert the three tenets – though we need to remember that the lack of one tenet does not immediately delegate a game into the non-cosy rubric.

This subversion is exactly what is happening in *NMS*. One of the main marketing points of the game concerned the vastness of its environments. The game was to "feature 18,446,744,073,709,551,616 worlds. That's 18 quintillion, if you were counting. Visiting each at the blistering rate of one per second would take five billion years" (Higgins, 2014). And it indeed had the effect that was to be expected from such a sublime representation of the vastness of cosmos:

> It brings back that sense that Elite provided – that you're a lonely and vulnerable traveller . . . The universe won't care when you're gone. The universe barely knows you're there (Stuart, 2023).

The alienating sojourn was perhaps intended by the designers of *NMS* as a counterpoint to the usual fare of games that through their focus on the medium logic can be considered *uncosy*. Sean Murray, the managing director of Hello Games, seems to suggest that purpose: "if you want deathmatch and that MMO progression there are so many more better games for that. For us what we're after is a more Journey-esque experience" (Warr, 2015). Murray is referring here to *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), an independent game focused on travelling through a vast desert, widely lauded for its pensive atmosphere that "leaves you feeling comfortably small" (Castania, 2023). However, unlike *Journey*, *NMS* forefronts its focus on game loops and traditionally realised conflict. Murray suggests that:

> [w]e want to create something that feels more real and people have stories from, rather than just an ambient experience. We want people to have real experiences and that means making choices and feeling like this is you, your character and what's around you is real and the adversity of the world (Murray in Warr, 2015).

Thus, *NMS* is not supposed to be just about the exploration of a static universe. Here, space-faring vessels are magnificent machines of war and speed, covering unfathomable distances of space in the blink of an eye. At least as long as they are fuelled, because in the game, players need to concern themselves with the economic aspect of travelling. The goals of the game are varied and include trading and conversing with alien races, exploring marvels of alien technologies, and reconnoitring exotic planets. Murray's "adversity of the world" (Murray in Warr, 2015) is realised by introducing enemies to that vast universe, either in the form of hostile local fauna and flora of explored planets, or equally dangerous encounters

in space. To deal with these threats the players are given typical tools of science-fiction combat – Blaze Javelins, Neutron Cannons, Paralysis Mortars, and so on. A common theme begins to emerge – it seems that the antithesis to cosy spaces is the spatial organisation that evokes the feelings of the sublime.

The sublime has been an influential theme in culture and cultural criticism, "from the Hellenistic Longinus to Freud and beyond" (Hobby & Bloom, 2010, p. xv). In the general sense, the sublime is an aesthetic or emotional experience that transcends the ordinary – "sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what may lie beyond these limits" (Shaw, 2006, p. 2). The connection between cosy games and the sublime may not be immediately apparent, as these two concepts are often associated with different aesthetic and emotional experiences. While cosy games and the sublime may seem contradictory, they can be connected through the idea of balance or contrast in the gaming experience. Players may find enjoyment in alternating between cosy and more sublime experiences (be it different games or spaces within a singular game). The contrast between the two can provide a diverse range of emotional and aesthetic encounters within the medium. In games, the sublime may emerge "when the elements of a digital experience such as autonomy, abstraction, permutation or complexity become undeterminable by the subject . . . Virtual frameworks such as multiplicity, topology and allegorithm encourage this scenario" (Betts, 2014, p. 42). In game studies, the theme was explored by various critics, both from the perspective of visual representations (Fraser, 2016; Martin, 2011) and that of technologic and ludic implications (Betts, 2014; Shinkle, 2012; Vella, 2015).

The environments discussed in this article frequently present a specific type of the sublime, which in turn may strengthen the feeling of departure from cosy spaces. The difference between a human spatial organisation and the sublime one is often just in pure mathematics of scale – "[t]he mathematical sublime can be thought of as an experience of an object in relation to its magnitude, differentiated between the 'simply great' and the 'absolutely great' . . . the absolutely great challenges our ability to reason through" (Spokes, 2020, p. 25). This is particularly visible in games taking place in outer space, where that vertigo-inducing backdrop of starscape posits a non-trivial challenge to comprehension. Human, cosy mathematics, operating on numbers within our scope of understanding, is expanded exponentially.

Secondly, the element of the technological sublime is also present: "[m]achines, as tangible, physical objects, . . . instil awe and might be understood as sublime because of the ways in which the mind encounters the enormity of the achievement of human endeavour" (Spokes, 2020, p. 38). This is further enhanced by the previously mentioned mathematical sublime – these are not just machines,

these are massive machines in motion, seemingly autonomous, with a purpose and design that are beyond our immediate comprehension.

Finally, we may also look at the gamified sublime as founded on the border between the human mind and the specificity of the digital game medium. One of the awe-inspiring aspects of the sublime, both romantic and postmodern, was that it forced the viewer into a stupor, an impossibility of action when faced with the grandiose. As Trifonova notes:

> [t]o feel overwhelmed by the size of natural phenomena like the ones filling the pages of Burke's *Enquiry* and Kant's *Critique* . . . is to experience the physical limits of human perception. By contrast, feeling overwhelmed by data is an experience of intellectual frustration as we become aware of our inability to 'read' or 'interpret' the amount of data we are presented with (Trifonova, 2018, p. 84).

In both cases, the audience, unable to comprehend the monumentality or complexity of the perceived subject, is forced to admit that no human logic can grasp the sublime material. Ksenia Fedorova observed a similar pattern of sublime incomprehension in some aspects of digital landscapes:

> certain phenomena of digital culture such as the autopoetic, generative qualities of code; the extension of the senses that makes new perceptions possible; virtual reality, which offers an illusion of immersion into "other," imagined worlds; and datascapes that are hardly navigable in their immensity and escape our ability to comprehend them in their 'totality' (Fedorova, 2018, p. 142).

This inability to comprehend could consequently turn towards stuplimity, "a concatenation of boredom and astonishment – a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue" (Ngai, 2009, p. 271). The foci of this logic in games are numerous: extrinsic reward, danger, fear, threat, responsibility, intense stimulus, distance, and phobia sources. These can be realised in complex or high-intensity game loops. *Dark Souls II* (FromSoftware, 2014), which focuses on memorising intricate move patterns of enemies and high lethality of combat, is rarely described as a cosy game. The gamified sublime may be detrimental to evoking cosiness because it introduces medium logic which Short et al. (2018) suggested is "negating cosiness", or which is "overlapping but not-cosy". Therefore, cosy games tend to either avoid it or restructure the experience towards less immediate stimuli.

At a glance, all three sublime conceptualisations of cosmos seem to squarely position games that evoke them into the non-conventional rubric of cosy play. Of

course, cosy spaces can still exist within these sublime landscapes – as sanctuaries, hiding holes (see Waszkiewicz and Bakun's situational cosiness). However, we may also assume that these avoidance strategies could strengthen through contrast the dominant message of awe and alienation. Still, I posit that despite aforementioned factors, some space games may not only evoke feelings of cosiness, but that feeling may become the principal mode of play. These games are to be played not for the experience of the sublime, but because they "evoke the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness" (Short et al., 2018). Investigating this 'taming' of the sublime should perhaps shed a new light on how cosy aesthetic may function in games whose topics or presentations are not usually considered congruent with cosiness. It is then time to investigate *NMS* as an example of a non-conventional space game and find how the sublime is tamed, reconstructed, and subverted.

Snug infinity: The cosy paradox of *No Man's Sky*

On the surface level all three types of the sublime are realised in *NMS*, positing the game in the non-conventional cosy rubric. The mathematical sublime exists in the scope of the distances traversed by the characters, but also in the incomprehensible near-infinity of spaces that the game seems to offer. The technological sublime is based on players' encounters with the wondrous space machines, which even in their smallest representations dwarf puny human form. And finally, the gamified sublime, visible in seemingly conventional gaming fare encouraging the player to scourge the planets for resources, upgrade, expand, explore, fight and die, reload and fight again. As per Short et. al.'s (2018) observation "[the] responsibility requires emotional labour: the effort to plan, think, and execute on a plan to resolve something. Being responsible generates high priority need/expectation". Here the constant barrage of game loops, of thinking through the mechanical processes that the game is built around, can be perceived as detrimental to the feeling of cosiness.

Andrew Reinhard, Kate Euphemia Clark, and Justin Carpenter examine *NMS*, focusing on these very concerns. The first author, for example, applies archaeological methodology to the study of digital and human habitation. He explores the fate of players, their creations, and the in-game community in the aftermath of a software update that made some player-made houses uninhabitable (Reinhard, 2021). The players' effort to create a safe, homely space was suddenly subjected to the entropic powers of cosmos. This disruption can be considered unsettling or even antithetical to a cosy framework. However, the event did not occur within the structure of what we traditionally understand as a game narrative. It was a meta-event, a change on the super-universe level that only a certain group of players experienced. Reinhard's perspective may certainly offer

a valuable analysis of how 'meta' events shape the experience of the players, and why the traditional perspective on the game narrative needs to be often reframed. In this paper, however, I focus on the designers' intentional attempts to establish/re-establish cosy aesthetics, and accidental events or meta disasters are beyond the scope of this analysis.

One of the arguments that Kate Euphemia Clark posits in her analysis of *NMS* is that the game in its early version did not conform to the expected structure of action, but rather allowed for a more passive play that focused on 'bearing witness' to the environment (Clark, 2022). This type of reconstruction of the typical mode of play may indeed be perceived as in tune with a cosy aesthetic. However, once again the intentionality of the authors should perhaps be taken into consideration. If we are to consider the number of major updates to *NMS*, it becomes quite clear that this initial version was most likely the outcome of a rushed publishing push rather than an authorial attempt to create the meditative and countercultural gaming experience as described by Clark. This particularly seems to ring true if we take into account Murray's quote above, suggesting that the adversity and non-ambient nature of the game was to be a preferred design scheme. Moreover, other critics' reactions to early versions of the game were far from meditative – "the game's title is true: this isn't yet a sky any man (or woman) should bother claiming" (Machkovech, 2016), "[i]n the end, it's just boring – a monotonous and dreary affair with pretty visuals and the promise of something more just over the horizon" (Kain, 2016). Moreover, this early version is simply not playable anymore, with consequent updates changing the game beyond recognition. In a truly hauntological fashion, we see the glimpses of what the artefact was, but cannot experience it first-hand. Consequently, while Clark's analysis offers a look into how players can construct their own experience in a predesigned game structure, the accidental, divisive, and ephemeral nature of this version of the cosy aesthetic proves beyond the scope of the paper.

In his work, Justin Carpenter (2022) analyses the generative design aspect of *NMS* and explores how the interaction between humans and machines is essentially a relational process. While Carpenter focuses on generative design and emergence, some aspects of the process seem to be congruent with attempts to establish a cosy aesthetic. One of the 'promises' of generative design is the apparent infinity of the game world. This aspect is going to be further analysed here, as a cosy 'meta-abundance' of play. The focus of Carpenter's analysis is not, however, on generating cosy. I would posit that purely generative environments need additional mechanisms to make them more congruent with the cosy aesthetic. Speaking about an early version of the game, Kain noted that "[w]hat sounds cool on paper – its vastness, its procedurally generated planets – is less gripping in execution. Eventually, . . . [s]ameness, and a withering lonesomeness, begin to define the

game's experiences" (Kain, 2016). After all, just as the infinity of the play universe may elicit feelings of abundance, it may also make one feel infinitely small and insignificant. Therefore, while generative environments may offer a foundation for the cosy experience, specific techniques need to be applied to strengthen or broaden the scope of that aesthetic.

The warm machines of war: Cosy aesthetic and retrofuturism

The foremost element that turns the cosmos into a cosy place in *NMS* is the game's spatial aesthetic realised on the visual level. While the game does not shy away from using contrasting and vivid colours, the palette remains warm and exuberant. That applies even to the images of starscape, where instead of the cold sublime backdrop of infinite darkness, more often than not the screen glows with the diffused luminosity, or light reflected from planetary rings, or asteroids. Even the vastness of cosmos is almost always filled and suffused, so the sense of emptiness can be very rarely experienced.

Figure 1. A representative image of the colour palette used in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

The second method of increasing the cosiness is focused on dealing with the mechanical sublime. As per aforementioned Spoke's observation, it results from "the mind [that] encounters the enormity of the achievement of human endeavour" (Spoke, 2020, p. 38). Emily Godbey, writing about American technology fairs of the past, emphasises that "[m]achines, factories, and engineering marvels are examples of the technological sublime. Americans treated machinery with reverence and awe, and their power . . . astonished and amazed crowds" (Godbey, 2014, p. 39). In the mechanical sublime of science fiction we see echoes of this awe. The underlying

complexity and incomprehensibility remain a source of the sublime experience, further enhanced by the deadly nature of machines.

NMS, however, reconstructs these tropes. There is a plethora of weapons and warships present in the game, but they rarely look like complex machines designed primarily for war. Handheld weapons are not even weapons since they are presented as modifications for the multitool that the player is using. This object itself bears some semblance of a futuristic gun; however, the representation is fanciful rather than war-like.
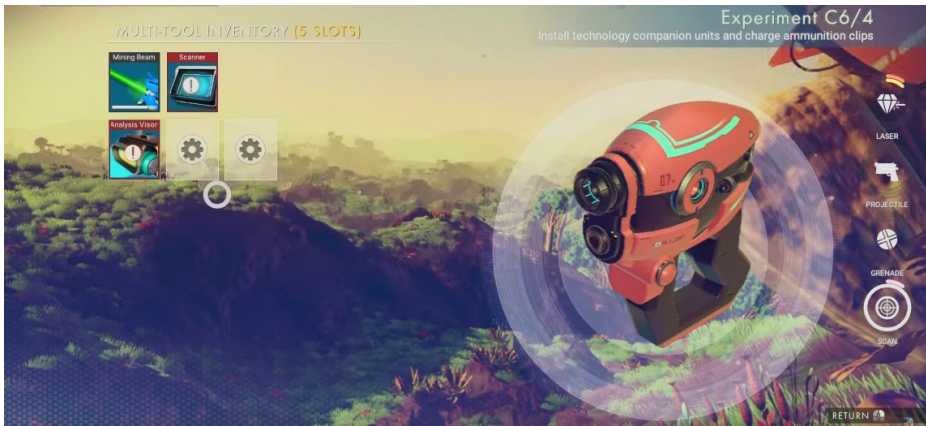
Figure 2. An example of a multitool/weapon used in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

Spaceships receive similar treatment – even crafts designated as war machines (fighter, interceptor) lack the visual menace usually present in science fiction.

Figure 3. , "Radiant Pillar BC1", a fighter class starship, in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

Space stations in the game are indeed massive objects, yet their representation is simplified to the extreme. They are mostly plain three-dimensional shapes, either orbs or polyhedra. Easy on the eyes, they lack the mind-boggling convolution that can be associated with what is, after all, a sophisticated machine complex.
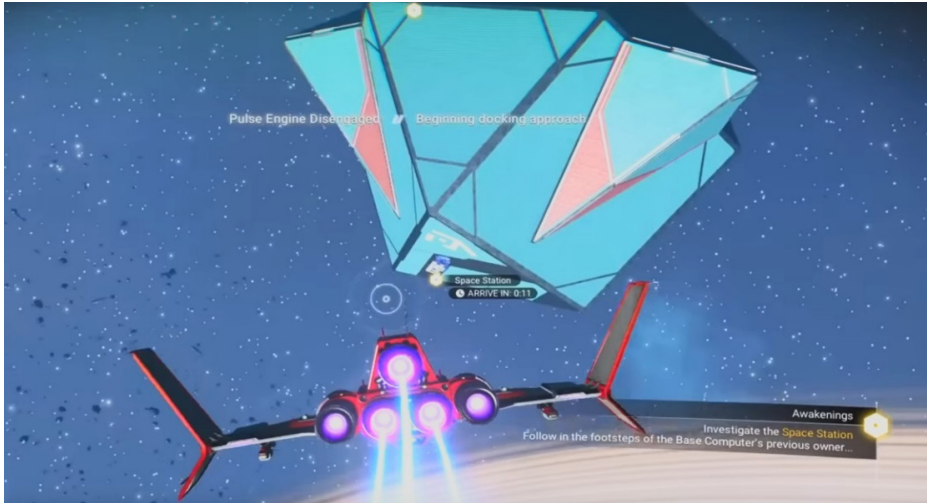
Figure 4. A representation of a space station used in *No Man's Sky*. Own screenshot.

Based on these changes we may assume that the spatial aesthetic of the technological sublime in *NMS* is influenced less by hard science fiction, and more by retrofuturism. Retrofuturistic aesthetic "encompasses multiple strands and meanings in twentieth-century culture, including the identification of 'the future' as a style, as well as content that highlights nostalgia, irony, and time-bending dislocation" (Latham, 2014, p. 434). By itself, retrofuturism can negate the feeling of cosiness – "at its most unsettling, retrofuturism disrupts our understanding of the nature of time, encouraging a kind of hybrid temporality. Retrofuturism reflects a time-bending vertigo, forcing our contemporaries to confront earlier conceptions of the future" (Lathatm, 2014, p. 437). This time-bending vertigo can be interpreted as congruent with the conventional realisation of the sublime aesthetic. However, *NMS* avoids unsettling unsteadiness, since its temporality is already well-established. There is no blurring of past and future, no Gibsonian "architecture of broken dreams" (Gibson, 2016). That is because it is the future, with its dreams fully realised in glorious, vibrant colours and smooth shapes.

Retrofuturism here is presented as the antithesis of the mimetic realism of space travel. Humanity already builds space stations and spaceships, and they look

anything but cosy. *NMS* is avoiding these realistic portrayals and reaches back into the past depictions of space travel, to *Flash Gordon* (Mike Hodges, 1980) and *Lost in Space* (Irwin Allen, 1965–1968): to a time when space adventure was men in tight leotards fighting with swords and blasters, not the gritty hard science, or politicised space race. The game carefully avoids the ironic and time-bending dislocating parts of retrofuturism, focusing more on its nostalgic aesthetic. It is the nostalgia for a never-realised past vision of the future. It feeds on our longing for the good old days when everything was simple, even the dreams of space travel. It does not necessarily matter that they never were simple, because you can play them as such. And as long as we play, dreams are never broken, since here even the machines of war are warm and cosy.

Traversable expanse: Movement and accessibility as elements inducing the feeling of cosiness

In the processes of play, another aspect of taming the infinity is to be found. *NMS* attempts to avoid overloading players with information through its approach to player's movement in the sublime space. Even on its own, movement can be a positive stimulus. As Steve Swink noted,

> [i]t's the kinetic pleasure of moving through space, creating flowing arcs of motion and feeling your body or the thing you're controlling respond instantly to your impulses. Even without a specific goal in mind, there is this intrinsic pleasure to control (Swink, 2017, p. 14).

What seems to matter here most is that it is not just movement but being in control. This is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of *NMS* – how the player comprehends and controls the space through movement. The alienation that is brought upon by sublime structures (space stations, alien architecture on planets) is largely negated by the player's ability to move around them in fully realised three-dimensional environments. This turns even the largest and most profound objects into playgrounds, perfectly possible to be grasped in their totality, first by the eye, and second by the mind. While their purpose may remain a mystery, some sense of control is regained.

NMS also introduces a constantly changing spatial scale. The spaceship is dwarfed by the space station, which in turn seems small in comparison with a gas giant, which itself is but a wisp of vapour against the distances of space. However, even these great distances are controlled by the player, who can boost their ship with the Pulse Drive or go even faster with the Hyperdrive. Unrestrained movement establishes a new hierarchy of control with the player firmly at the helm.

Smooth transitions strengthen that feeling. From walking on the planet's surface, we can enter the cockpit of our ship, then fly into space, and boost to the next point of interest. Through all that there is nary a loading screen that could disrupt our control of perceptual spatial relations.

The smooth scale of transition additionally becomes an answer to threats present in the universe. We can escape the planetary predators by jumping into the ship and avoid space pirates by simply boosting away. The feeling of total control over something so awesome, in turn, is congruent with how "cosy games creates [sic] spaces for higher order needs like mastery" (Short et al., 2018). It is a literal interpretation of Lyuba Encheva's reading of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of optimal experience, which "can be seen to describe the impact of the sublime encounter as a movement from the overpowering experience of something greater than oneself to an empowering sense of being in control" (Encheva, 2018, p. 132). And there is another layer to that process relating to the very matter of the subject. Movement and control tame the sublime of space, while at the same time helping to retain the sense of wonder, which is, after all, inscribed into the exploration of the Final Frontier. Since there is always a space to move, infinity becomes a safe zone, a cosy environment.

Ride eternal, shiny and chrome. Rituals of journey, life and death as cosy aesthetics

While movement may indeed foster feelings of total control, it can, in the long run, lead to boredom. As Swink observed:

> [f]rom the point of view of a game designer, there is a problem even with the best sensations of control. Controlled motion is pleasurable, but that pleasure is fleeting. Even if the game feels great, aimlessly controlling something gets boring quickly (Swink, 2017, p. 16).

In the long run, movement and control seem to require a goal, a quantification of effort. In games, boredom of pure control can be overcome by introducing game logic into the system. In this case, "with a specific goal to pursue, control takes on new meaning. Aimless, pleasurable motion is replaced by focused, purposeful attempts to complete the challenges presented" (Swink, 2017, p. 17). However, such a shift may introduce the element that Short et al. (2018) described as "negating cosiness," or "overlapping but not-cosy," since it usually induces certain responsibilities. *NMS*, however, manages to transform it into something that can still enhance the feeling of being cosy.

While games generally tend to have specific, quantifiable goals (Costikyan, 1994; Juul, 2010; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), how that quantification is achieved is open for interpretation. Games can be played to be won and to be finished, but also to be simply prolonged (Zagal et al., 2019). This last category is what seems to be the design methodology behind *NMS*. First, the game uses a different approach to incentivise the movement itself. Its procedurally generated universe offers almost endless possibilities. Because of that, while we usually do travel to a destination with a specific purpose, travelling becomes a goal in its own right. At each stage, we are rewarded with discoveries of new planets, landscapes, plants and creatures, and there is always a promise of more just beyond the (event) horizon. This is also how another game incentive aspect is realised – the game's narrative. *NMS* uses a type of seasonal content delivery, with each free update adding a specific expedition, with a well-defined goal to be achieved. While these expeditions can be finished in the traditional sense of a narrative end and goal completion, they are usually focused on introducing a specific game mechanic, showcasing a new aspect of the sandbox environment. So instead of providing a sense of closure, they rather open up new possibilities in the grand scheme of the game. This is congruent with the message of abundance characteristic of cosy games – "nothing is lacking, pressing or imminent" (Short et al., 2018). Here, we have a sort of meta-abundance, a promise that we will never run out of the game to play.

Secondly, the game has a very forgiving approach to the expected fare of human existence in outer space – danger and death. The usual run of *NMS* puts us stranded on an alien planet, some distance away from a crashed spaceship. To survive, we need to find resources and fix the ship. This may feel overwhelming, but players may soon realise that the danger is only relative. Death usually does not result in a game over but causes the player character to simply wake up again, stranded on an alien planet not far from a crashed spaceship. Our existence in this universe is an endless loop, where death becomes not an endpoint, but one of the many inevitable passages in the never-ending journey. What is more, the designers of the game decided to turn this medium literacy reading into a narrative of the game. In the Leviathan update the players find themselves:

> inside a time loop, . . . and every death means a reset of the loop (where players restart at the beginning of the expedition with all inventory reset). As players explore the loop, they will recover Memory Fragments: lost remnants of previous loops manifested as procedurally generated technology (Anon, 2023).

Through that, the message of the medium is incorporated into the game world itself, becoming a ritualistic rite of passage towards a deeper understanding of both the narrative and the medium itself. The game allows players to not only journey through

the universe at their own pace, but also reconsider the established tropes of interactive entertainment genera. The rituals of life and death emphasise the subconscious logic of games – winning matters to some, playing matters to more.

Conclusions

The article has explored the concept of cosiness in *NMS*, examining how the game transforms the vast and potentially sublime space into a cosy environment. I have briefly addressed criticisms and analyses from other perspectives, such as the game's early version not conforming to expected action structures and the impact of software updates on player experiences. Ultimately, I have contended that intentional design choices contribute to the establishment of cosy aesthetics in the game, challenging traditional or conventional representations of the material. This is achieved through three techniques, designed to tame the sublime typically represented in space games. First, the article has suggested that the game challenges traditional notions of high technology and conflict in space by focusing on a retrofuturistic portrayal of spacefaring vessels, weapons, and space stations. Secondly, I have explored the idea of a "traversable expanse," emphasising the player's control over movement and spatial relations, turning even the most profound objects into playable environments. Finally, the concept of a "ritualistic rite of passage" has been discussed in connection to the game's processes of restructuring traditional design schemes concerning life and death.

Not every player is going to experience *NMS* as cozy. Some may still find survival elements, combat, and the sheer sublime of cosmos too antithetical to their needs and wants. But the same could be said about any other usual suspect of this aesthetic. *Terraria* has its Wall of Flesh, and *Stardew Valley* has the nightmare/dream of the Protestant work ethic. However, despite the challenges posed by non-conventional spaces and sublime elements, the game manages to evoke feelings of cosiness. The analysis conducted here has aimed to explore how the game subverted the sublime, reconstructing it to create a principal mode of play centred on the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness.

We can state that cosiness should not only be perceived as inherent to the specific choice of the material, but rather as a methodology executable within any medium, genre or environment. This, I believe, is congruent with Short et. al.'s (2018) final message – "there is a deep well of emotionally resonant design patterns you can use to make almost any game cosier." What is, however, worth emphasising is the fact that this injection of cosy is not done to the detriment of the source material. The cosy space in *NMS* remains sublime and awe-inspiring. In the process, the game seems to prove that there is space and time for the cosy, no matter the source material, and all games may indeed benefit from introducing some aspects of it.

Bibliography

Allen, I. (Director). (1965–1968). *Lost in Space*. CBS.

Betts, T. (2014). An Investigation of the Digital Sublime in Video Game Production [Doctoral dissertation, University of Huddersfield]. Huddersfield Repository. https://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/25020/

Carpenter, J. (2022). The Aesthetics of Human-Machine Interaction: Generative Textuality in Hello Games's *No Man's Sky*. *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, *9*(2), 173–190. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/20539320.2022.2150464

Castania, G. (2022, September 16). Best Cozy Games On Steam. *TheGamer*. https://www.thegamer.com/steam-pc-best-cozy-games/#journey (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Clark, K.E. (2022). Unravelling Narratives of Empire in No Man's Sky. *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, *54*(4), 585–598. https://doi.org/10.4467/20843860PK.22.039.17093

Encheva, L. (2018). Flow, Freedom, and the Gamified Sublime. In: T. Trifonova (Ed.), *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime* (pp. 131–141). Routledge.

Expedition Seven: Leviathan. (2022, May 25). *No Man's Sky*. https://www.nomanssky.com/2022/05/expedition-seven-leviathan/ (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Fedorova, K. (2018). The Ambiguity Effects of the Techno-Sublime. In: T. Trifonova (Ed.), *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime* (pp. 142–150). Routledge.

Fraser, E. (2016). Awakening in Ruins: The Virtual Spectacle of the End of the City in Video Games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *8*(2), 177–196. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.8.2.177_1

Gibson, W. (1988). The Gernsback C ontinuum. *Invention & Technology*, *4*(1). https://www.inventionandtech.com/content/gernsback-continuum-1 (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Godbey, E. (2014). Speed and Destruction at the Fair. In: J. Miller, M. Howell (Eds.), *Motorsports and American Culture: From Demolition Derbies to NASCAR* (pp. 39–51). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Higgins, C. (2014). No Man's Sky Would Take 5 Billion Years to Explore. *Wired UK*. https://www.wired.co.uk/article/no-mans-sky-planets (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Hobby, B., & Bloom, H. (Eds.) (2010). *The Sublime*. Chelsea House Publishers.

Hodges, M. (Director). (1980). *Flash Gordon*. Universal Pictures.

Jenkins, H. (2003). Game Design as Narrative Architecture. *Polish Association for American Studies*. https://paas.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/09.-Henry-Jenkins-Game-Design-As-Narrative-Architecture.pdf (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Juul, J. (2010). In Search of Lost Time: On Game Goals and Failure Costs. *FDG '10: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on the Foundations of*

Digital Games. Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/1822348.1822360

Kain, E. (2016, August 20). "No Man's Sky" Review: Dead Space. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/games/2016/08/20/no-mans-sky-review-dead-space/ (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Latham, R. (Ed.) (2014). *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*. Oxford University Press.

Machkovech, S. (2016, August 15). *No Man's Sky* Review: Total Eclipse of the Galaxy's Heart. *Ars Technica*. https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2016/08/no-mans-sky-review-total-eclipse-of-the-galaxys-heart/ (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Martin, P. (2011). The Pastoral and the Sublime in Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. *Game Studies*, *11*(3).

Ngai, S. (2009). *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press.

Reinhard, A. (2021). Archeology of Abandoned Human Settlements in *No Man's Sky*: A New Approach to Recording and Preserving User-Generated Content in Digital Games. *Games and Culture*, *16*(7), 855–884. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211005236

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. The MIT Press.

Shaw, P. (2006). *The Sublime.* Routledge.

Shinkle, E. (2012). Videogames and the Digital Sublime. In: A. Karatzogianni & A. Kunstman (Eds.), *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change* (pp. 94–108). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Short, T.X., Ordon, A., Hurd, D., Howe, C., Forbes, J., Eiserloh, S., Diaz, J., Cook, D., & Meiners, R. (2018, January 24). Cozy games. *Lostgarden*. https://lostgarden.home.blog/2018/01/24/cozy-games/ (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Smith, A. (2012, March 12). Life Flashing By: Dys4ia. *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*. https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/life-flashing-by-dys4ia (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Spokes, M. (2020). *Gaming and The Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games.* Emerald Publishing Limited.

Stuart, K. (2016, August 19). No Man's Sky is Elite for the 21st century. Pointless? Maybe – but also sublime. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/19/no-mans-sky-elite (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Sullivan, A., Stanfill, M., & Salter, A. (2023). The Constraints of Cozy Games: Boyfriend Dungeon and Consent in Queer Play. In: P. Lopes, F. Luz, A. Liapis, & H. Engström (Eds.), *FDG '23: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3582437.3582452

Swink, S. (2017). *Game Feel: A Game Designer's Guide to Virtual Sensation*. CRC Press.

Trifonova, T. (2018). Of Fake and Real Sublimes. In: T. Trifonova (Ed.), *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime* (pp. 74–87). Routledge.

Vella, D. (2015). No Mastery without Mystery: *Dark Souls* and the Ludic Sublime. *Game Studies*, *15*(1).

Warr, P. (2015, July 7). No Man's Sky Interview: Sean Murray Vs The Hype Train. *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*. https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/no-mans-sky-interview (accessed on March 6, 2024).

Waszkiewicz, A., & Bakun, M. (2020). Towards the Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *12*(3), 225–240. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00017_1

Zagal, J., Debus, M., & Cardona-Rivera, R. (2019, October 21–25). *On the Ultimate Goals of Games: Winning, Finishing, and Prolonging*. The 13th International Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Petersburg, Russia. http://rogel.io/content/2-publications/zagal2019ultimate.pdf

Ludography

Anthropy, A. (2012). *Dys4ia*. Newgrounds.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2014). *Hearthstone*. Blizzard Entertainment.

CCP Games. (2003). *EVE Online*. CCP Games.

Cloud Imperium Games. (TBA). *Star Citizen*. Cloud Imperium Games.

ConcernedApe. (2016). *Stardew Valley*. Chucklefish.

Egosoft. (2018). *X4: Foundations*. Egosoft

Fox, T. (2015). *Undertale*. World: Toby Fox.

FromSoftware. (2014). *Dark Souls II*. Bandai Namco, FromSoftware.

Frontier Dev UK. (2015). *Elite Dangerous*. Frontier Developments.

Hello Games. (2016). *No Man's Sky*. Hello Games

Infinite Fall. (2017). *Night in the Woods*. Finji.

Kitfox Games. (2021). *Boyfriend Dungeon*. Kitfox Games

Origin Systems. (1993). *Wing Commander: Privateer*. Origin Systems, Electronic Arts.

Re-Logic. (2011). *Terraria*. Re-Logic.

Tomasz Gnat, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures, University of Silesia. He researches interactive entertainment – both from the theoretical and practical design perspectives. His main areas of focus are the digital material culture of games and the rhetoric of interactive entertainment.

C a i g h l a n   S m i t h * iD

Getting Cozy with the Zombie Apocalypse: The Saferoom as Capitalist Breakroom in *Left 4 Dead* and *Back 4 Blood*

A b s t r a c t

This article considers how players experience coziness inside the saferooms of *Left 4 Dead*, *Left 4 Dead 2*, and *Back 4 Blood*, which are otherwise high-demand, fast-paced first-person shooter zombie games. Pairing Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun's concept of "situational coziness" with James Ash's "intense space," this discussion first explores how moments of coziness can occur within competitive and stressful FPS environments, and indeed may be considered cozy specifically in how they afford temporal, spatial, aesthetic, and audial reprieves from the stress of those environments. I explore how such situational coziness, when produced as both break from and reward for succeeding at stressful zombie apocalypse gameplay, contributes to the zombie genre's ability to allow players performances of an idealized iteration of capitalism's work/leisure cycle, as both "work" and "leisure" have come to be defined under and in service to exploitative capitalist labor conditions.

Keywords: capitalism, first-person shooter games, safe zones, situational coziness, work/leisure cycle

---

*   Memorial University of Newfoundland, e-mail: cmis18@mun.ca, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2145-6174

Introduction

The first-person shooter (FPS) genre is not typically associated with coziness. Its signature fast-paced, high-demand, violent gameplay is far more likely to elevate player stress levels than to relax them (Ash, 2013). It is this exact stressful capacity of the FPS genre, however, which allows such games to provide pockets of cozy affect to players, when taking a break from shooting and being shot at. Tanya X. Short et al. describe this phenomenon of coziness in stereotypically non-cozy games as a "cozy sandwich" in which gameplay primarily consists of "meaty moments of action" but is padded by "comforting moments of coziness" (Short et al., 2018). Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun label this type of game design "situational coziness" which "gives the players a moment of break between more challenging parts of the gameplay" (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 233). These moments often occur at save points and safe zones, which serve to mark the player's progress while providing "refuge in an otherwise intense game" (Short et al., 2018). Examples of such save points include *Resident Evil*'s (Capcom, 1996) iconic typewriter, bonfires and sites of grace in the otherwise notoriously difficult *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) and *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022), as well as the bonfires/campfires in *Don't Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013), *Hyper Light Drifter* (Heart Machine, 2016), and *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013). Other such moments of reprieve from action and survival-oriented gameplay occur in safe zones like the bunker in *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017), Sam's room in *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), and the hamlet in *Darkest Dungeon* (Red Hook Studios, 2016).

A popular example of videogame safe zones are the saferooms in Valve Corporation's FPS zombie survival games *Left 4 Dead* and *Left 4 Dead 2* (Valve Corporation, 2008 and 2009), the design of which influenced the saferooms in the series' more recent spiritual successor, Turtle Rock Studios' (2021) *Back 4 Blood*. Taking the *Left 4 Dead* series' (henceforth *L4D*) and *Back 4 Blood*'s (*B4B*) saferooms as a case study, this paper explores how situational coziness is established in these brief moments of respite – despite, but also through, the anxiety-inducing mechanics and aesthetics of the rest of the games. I argue that these cozy moments, as attained through highly-stressful – if also enjoyable – zombie-killing labor, reproduce an idealized version of capitalism's work/leisure cycle, which adheres to capitalist conceptions of *work*, *leisure*, and *freedom*. Engaging players in their real-world leisure time in a virtual fantasy of a more fulfilling work/leisure cycle may add needed value and respite to players' individual lives, but in doing so it nonetheless recharges them for the comparably unfulfilling work of contemporary capitalism. Prior to delving into this capitalism-sustaining relationship, however, it is important to examine how one designs a cozy saferoom during the zombie apocalypse, which first requires a discussion of "coziness" itself.

How 2 get cozy

Coziness "denotes a kind of atmosphere characterized by a particularly informal and relaxed spirit of being together, or even being alone" (Bille, 2015, p. 257). Speaking specifically to video games, Short et al. (2018) suggest that "[c]oziness itself refers to how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness," while Jordan Youngblood highlights the importance of "proximity, warmth, [and] intimacy" (Youngblood, 2022, p. 534) to establishing cozy atmospheres during gameplay. While games which feature intense gameplay do not fall under the typical umbrella of "cozy games," such games may still evoke situational coziness in a way that echoes how we often pursue or attain our bursts of cozy affect in real life.

However, coziness itself does not have to be entirely divorced from experiences of hardship, trauma, or stress. Pursuing secure moments of cozy affects within such intense relations is common in real-life and can likewise be designed into gaming. David Edery, co-founder of the studio behind *Cozy Grove*, explains how the "past trauma" and "survivor's guilt" of the game's characters might not be "a cozy topic, but the friendship you develop, how you help them, how you walk them through what they're feeling, that became cozy" (Martens, 2021, p. 19). The fact that helping someone else – or oneself – through stressful if not traumatic lived experiences can come to feel cozy or may be best pursued in a cozy environment (Fraimen, 2022), reveals the healing properties of coziness.

"Cozy," in gaming and in life more broadly, refers not simply to a nice and warm affective feeling, but to the safe space behind that feeling. To be cozy is to be safe, if only momentarily. In the safe space of coziness, one can lick their physical and/or psychological wounds without an immediate threat of those wounds being reopened, whether those are the virtual wounds suffered from zombie hordes, tended to in post-apocalyptic saferooms, or the very real wounds we each carry – to varying degrees – from capitalism, which we tend to in our capitalist-bequeathed leisure time.

Getting cozy with capitalist leisure

Leisure, while certainly a concept predating capitalism in contemporary capitalist society:

> [I]s not only dependent upon labor as a defining condition (i.e., leisure is understood as that which is not labor), but it also defers to labor as a justification (one is not entitled to leisure without labor), a model of operation (the pursuit of hobby and leisure is increasingly career-like), and the source of economic resources required to participate in increasingly consumption-oriented leisure activities (Beckham, 2017, p. 95).

J. Nikol Beckham here illustrates how capitalism renders "work time" and "leisure time" as two distinct entities, wherein the latter is a reward for the former, and the latter comes to be conflated with freedom. Under capitalism, feeling "free" often equates to being free from work. As Thomas Raymen highlights, "[t]he traditional positioning of leisure in contradistinction to work has made leisure irretrievably synonymous with 'freedom' and agency" (Raymen, 2019, p. 22). It is during our leisure that we feel "free" due to leisure time's supposed increase of our individual agency, that is, the power to make personal choices. Such a sense of freedom better facilitates the relaxation required to evoke cozy affect.

Yet many do not pursue (or do not pursue exclusively) coziness in their leisure, instead taking this time free from work to partake in other types of work. This phenomenon connects with Robert Fletcher's observation that leisure is often used to pursue "qualities seen as lacking in everyday work life" (Fletcher, 2011, p. 453). Speaking specifically about gaming, Jane McGonigal explores how video games appeal to players because they give players the chance to take on "more satisfying work" (McGonigal, 2011, p. 55), offering players more personal connections to their virtual labor and a better sense of agency than the comparably "alienating and de-authenticating" labor of capitalist society (Fletcher, 2011, p. 453).

Yet within these fantasies of fulfilling labor, breaks from game labor are still often embedded in game space itself, such as in the form of menu lobbies or in-game saferooms. The fleeting coziness of such safe spaces contributes to a virtual work/leisure cycle that does not reject the capitalist logic structuring that cycle, but instead rehearses an idealized version of capitalism's cycle, in which one feels connected to and meaningfully agentic in both work time and leisure time. The labor of zombie games, however joyous and liberatory it may feel, is liberating the player not from capitalism itself, but from unfulfilling labor in capitalism, which many players must turn back to once their zombie slaying liberation is done.

Zombie leisure

The potential for zombie games to engage the laborer's dream of meaningful fulltime employment, liberating them from precarious work into secure work, is elsewhere explored by Michael Epp. As Epp articulates, the zombie apocalypse genre provides players with the opportunity to "enjoy guaranteed full employment. The inexhaustible zombie and its usually slow but always busy world promise… a utopic world in which everyone is required to work, endlessly producing security for themselves and their fellow survivors" (Epp, 2020, p. 72). Epp here indicates how full-time employment is not only a desirable fantasy in capitalism's current epoch of precarious employment, but that managing zombie hordes is itself a full-time job, if one that many find enjoyably productive.

It can of course also be argued that there is plenty of *unproductive* fun to be had in zombie games. As Kristine Jørgensen highlights, zombie games are appealing because they engage a more competitive, productive, goal- and strategy-oriented "telic" mindset while also allowing for spontaneous, exploratory, and creative "paratelic" mindsets, oriented by immediate gratification (Jørgensen, 2020, pp. 132–133). Yet, according to Jørgensen, the "predictability" of zombies can invite players into a paratelic mindset in such a way that "utilizes the seductive power of playfulness" to create "a precise simulation of how zombie film survivors get killed as a consequence of hubris" (Jørgensen, 2020, p. 134). In other words, the zombie survivor as worker is allowed moments of reprieve within their workspace, so long as they are skilled enough at their job to pivot back to work as soon as they risk being overwhelmed by tasks/zombies.

This threat to the *unproductive* laborer, as only experienced in demarcated *productive* spaces (i.e., zombie-infested areas, where one must be *on the job*) reiterates capitalist concepts of the work/leisure divide. In zombie games, as in capitalism's standard work/leisure cycle, there are specific spaces in which we are expected to work, and other spaces in which we are expected to be unproductive, to recharge for, and heal from work. These unproductive leisure spaces are both temporal, in what time of day and for how long we may access them (e.g., lunch time, after work, weekends, holidays), and spatial (e.g., home, shopping centres, cinemas, restaurants and bars, etc.). Zombie shooters, such as the *L4D* series and *B4B*, offer the reward of temporal and spatial safe space in the form of saferooms. In the saferoom, players can – if they so choose – recharge in situational post-apocalyptic coziness, to better prepare them for their next work shift in the intense time and space of the zombie apocalypse.

Safe spaces vs stress spaces

Multiplayer FPS games often feature what James Ash identifies as "intense spaces" which are "designed to amplify the potential for contingent encounters to occur between users, and… encourage users to develop highly trained sensorimotor skills to cope with these encounters" (Ash, 2013, p. 31). These intense spaces manifest as battle maps which facilitate player interaction, often featuring cover from enemies, labyrinthine pathways, shortcuts, and hidden areas which allow for various forms of multiplayer engagement, from direct combat to ambushes. While the *L4D* titles and *B4B* also feature single-player gameplay, this gameplay is undertaken in the same maps designed for their multiplayer modes, in which players may form teams and work together against AI enemies or compete against fellow human players acting as the opposing zombie team.[1] Single-player gameplay therefore takes place

---

[1] While zombies are respectively referred to as "infected" in *L4D* and "ridden" in *B4B*, I will be using the term "zombie" to refer to both throughout this discussion.

in intense spaces, designed for intense user-to-user interactions, which for the solo player is experienced as intense user-to-AI interactions.

Intense spaces generally "require the development of close forms of attention and concentration from users if they are to perform well in the game" (Ash, 2013, p. 33). In *L4D* and *B4B*, as in other FPS games, the player is incentivised to perform productively through the in-game tracking of a player's kill count via scoreboards; the promise of meta-game achievements to be attributed to the player's gaming profile, thereby increasing one's "gaming capital" (Švelch, 2013, p. 199); the inter-personal desire not to hold back one's team in multiplayer; and, specifically in *B4B*, in-game items collected during or awarded at the end of a level (e.g., cards for a player's deck which provide various gameplay perks). The display of one's kill count can be an especially potent incentive for players to increase their skills, given that every player's number of kills and teammate assists are displayed in ranked order – to all players – at the end of each level. Through the competitive drive to improve, facilitated by an intense space in which one feels "an enemy could creep up and kill the user's avatar at any moment" (Ash, 2013, p. 41), the FPS player is captivated by gameplay in a way that produces engagingly stressful in-game labor.

The intensity and subsequent player-engagement of *L4D* and *B4B*'s game levels benefit from the former's AI Director and the latter's iteration, the Game Director. *L4D* director Mike Booth describes the AI Director as being designed to balance player experience, through both streams of zombies and periodic breaks from the onslaught, to guarantee sessions that are not "either too easy or crushingly hard" (Freeman-Mills, 2018, para. 31). From the time one leaves a saferoom at the start of a level, to the time one reaches and shuts the door in the corresponding saferoom at the end of the level, the Director is constantly spawning various types of zombies, based on the player's or team's speed and location. For example, in *L4D*:

> [A]ny attempt to slow down the action, or rest, or take time to admire the micronar-rative objects littered throughout each level, will almost certainly be punished by the game's AI Director, which will spawn a horde of zombies, or a "special" class infected enemy to get the player moving again (McKissak & May, 2018, p. 558).

Even after players have defeated one of the game's hordes, they cannot rest long, otherwise another horde or series of special zombies will descend. The only place players can truly take a break from the zombie onslaught is the saferoom.

Outside the saferoom, players must always be aware of their surroundings, as a decrepit building or toppled bus could hide a dangerous special zombie, ready to pounce. The audio cues during gameplay amplify this anxiety, featuring distinct sound effects for special zombies that have spawned somewhere nearby (e.g., maniacal laughing for a jockey or animalistic growling for a hunter in *L4D*) and

short warning jingles signaling an incoming horde or boss zombie, such as the car-throwing tank (*L4D*) or the massive ogre (*B4B*). *B4B* additionally features constant hissing, spluttering, and monstrous cries, even when no zombies are immediately nearby, setting the player on edge through the sense of constant threat.

In video games, sound effects and music are highly effective in setting atmosphere and mood, and for propelling the player into action whether it be through battle theme music or warning sounds to signal danger (Grimshaw, 2008; Owens, 2022; Stevens, 2020). Speaking to the affective potential of audio, Shusaku Uchiyama, composer on *Resident Evil 2*, states of *Resident Evil*'s iconic saferoom music:

> They may be "saferooms", but that safety is fleeting. You always feel like the moment you step outside the room, you might encounter some nightmare wandering the halls… So it was indeed intentional for the music to be a mixture of peaceful and relaxing elements with a little touch of the uneasy about it (Martin, 2020, para. 3).

By contrast, the music that plays when one completes a level in *L4D* or *B4B* is not ominous but victorious, confirming the player has conquered the level and saved their progress, audially triggering both triumph and relief, as the survivors have finally reached safety and may – for a moment – relax.

Cozy apocalypse

The situational coziness of the saferoom is created by the ever-present threat of zombies and amplified by disturbing audio cues, eerie and decrepit environments, and the mounting stress of completing levels in intense space. As in other games which deploy situational coziness, the saferoom "offers the player brief moments of peace" and "a change of pace to juxtapose more action-packed moments" (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 236). This situational peace is achieved by playing on the core elements of cozy games: safety, softness, and abundance (Short et al., 2018). Players are aware that they have attained "safety" upon entering the saferoom and shutting its door, which creates a safe space in which they are protected from all threats in the level until the door is opened. Meanwhile, players can access abundance in saferooms more so than anywhere else in the games: in *L4D* useful resources spawn in each saferoom, such as guns, med-kits, unlimited ammunition piles, and occasionally other healing or throwable items. *B4B*, on the other hand, features a saferoom shop system which allows players to buy useful items with the copper they collect across levels. These saferoom resource options contrast "the more frequent gameplay experience of… resource scarcity," creating a sense of abundance (Short et al., 2018).

Softness, the most seemingly unachievable affect in a competitive zombie survival game, manifests in the saferoom through a leveraging of audio, aesthetics, object placement, and intimate space, which provide "comforting feedback and an opportunity of a lowered state of arousal" (Short et al., 2018). From within the saferoom, typically anxiety-inducing audio cues register differently. The sound of zombies clawing at the barricaded saferoom door, with no way inside until the player chooses to leave the saferoom, registers as a post-apocalyptic version of heavy rain outside while one is safe indoors. As Short et al. (2018) articulate, "cold rain against a window emphasizes the warmth of a reading nook without threatening to disrupt it". Zombies banging against the unbreachable door emphasize – without threatening to disrupt – the security of the saferoom. The threat of zombies/rain is kept at bay until the player chooses to engage (i.e., open the door), thus creating a controllable, secure space that will "fulfil the need of safety and allow for a more reflexive and mindful approach" to gameplay (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 227).

The aesthetics of the saferoom likewise lend themselves to cozy affect. Both games feature saferoom set dressing which evoke contemporary concepts of the work/leisure cycle. For example, in *L4D1* we come upon a bag of dog food next to the weapons stash (Figure 1), while in *L4D2* a water cooler, emblematic of breaktime in workplace culture, appears beside the ammo pile and the survivors' sleeping bags (Figure 2). In *B4B*, leftover pizza boxes and full trash bags, waiting to be taken to the curb, appear next to bloody drag marks (Figure 3), while elsewhere a coffee machine is set up against peeling and decaying wallpaper (Figure 4). In a videogame set in the present day, the normalcy of a coffee machine juxtaposed by blood splatters and overturned furniture may produce a sense of dread and evoke Sigmund Freud's uncanny, in how something in the environment has disrupted or mutated the familiar – has rendered the "homely" as *unhomely* (Freud's, 1919/1976, p. 620). As Steve Spittle highlights, the disruption and decaying of game environments that would otherwise appear normative to players, be it through "unaccountably smeared blood" or "ransacked… and disused" spaces, produces the uncanny when an unknown threat underpins the disruption (Spittle, 2011, p. 317).
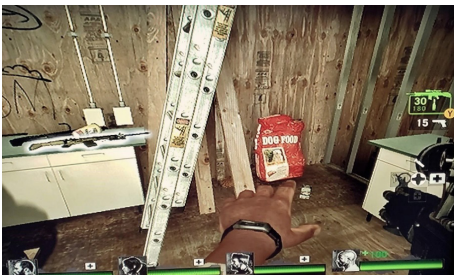

Figure 1 and 2. Inside *L4D1* (left) and *L4D2* (right) saferooms.

Figure 3 and 4. Inside *B4B* saferooms.

However, in a zombie apocalypse game, such callbacks to normalcy alongside apocalyptic carnage and decay, as encountered in a designated zombie-free safe space, can produce an uncanny coziness rather than an uncanny discomfort. The zombie threat may be present outside the saferoom, but it is a known threat. Within the saferoom, uncanny reminders of the safe machinations of contemporary home spaces are situated to evoke not a discomfort towards the unknown source of disruption, but a comforting reminder of aspects of home that have survived a known disruption. A cup of coffee on break in the saferoom, before grabbing one's blood-crusted baseball bat and charging back into the horde, may be uncanny in the juxtaposition between contemporary normalcy and post-apocalyptic chaos, but it is also the coziest a player – or a team – can get in the general uncanniness of the zombie apocalypse.

In multiplayer mode, saferooms fulfill an additional cozy function. Here, players can take a moment to relax and socialize; they can plan for the upcoming level, discuss the level they just completed, or simply chat and joke around. While such social interactions are not impossible during a level, the AI/Game Director typically interrupts attempts at social breaks of prolonged length – unless all players are skilled enough to hold a casual conversation while decimating undead hordes. Even then, these conversations occur while one is simultaneously undertaking the mental task of successfully navigating intense game space. Such mid-level socialization, while pivotal to working as a team and certainly enjoyable to many players, is therefore always underwritten by – if not specifically focused on – the player's goal of successfully completing the level and dominating the foes that stand between them and the saferoom. In other words, stress is added to socialization beyond the saferoom, which by contrast affords socialization within the saferoom a calmer atmosphere, contributing to the saferoom's situational coziness.

However, saferoom coziness can be just as easily disrupted through multiplayer interactions as it can be increased. For instance, in *L4D*, a player may open the saferoom door at any time, exposing all within to potential zombie attacks, whether each player is ready to begin the level or not. There are moments when

players on slower internet connections have not yet loaded into the next level, only to find upon loading that they have been abandoned by teammates anxious to progress gameplay, left vulnerable – if not immediately under attack – in the opened saferoom. While saferoom coziness may in this way be disrupted by players who are in a rush irrespective of their teammates, coziness may also be compromised for players who are frustrated by teammates who take too long in the saferoom.

In *B4B*, for example, players must wait a mandatory 180 seconds in the saferoom between levels, unless all players agree to opt out of breaktime and begin the level early (for examples of player discord over this wait time, see the following Reddit discussion threads: CharityDiary, 2021; Cremacious, 2021). When such team dynamics arise, in which people are either forced to rush or to wait, anxiety and frustration can seep into the otherwise cozy refuge of the saferoom. Team disparity, and indeed the concept of coziness as a reward for a cohesive team, are additional indicators of the saferoom's mirroring of the leisure side of capitalism's work/leisure cycle. Discontent teammates, be they coworkers during lunchtime, family members on the weekend, or fellow survivors in the saferoom, can disrupt the coziness and the freedom of one's limited and cherished capitalist leisure time.

Conclusion: The breakroom

The zombie apocalypse, as coded for gameplay, positions fighting the zombies as a meaningful (if playful) and conquerable work task for the laborer-player. As Jaroslav Švelch explores, in video games, "the strategizing player sees [zombies] as challenges – as targets that follow certain rules, and that can be taken apart using a suitable method" (Švelch, 2013, p. 194). While one may certainly employ such strategizing skills to their real-life employment, that real-life employment is still vulnerable to unpredictable, unknowable life circumstances. The joy of zombie employment, in the zombie game's work/leisure cycle, is that its challenges are knowable, manageable, and will only alter at a pace controlled by the player-laborer (i.e., different difficulty or game modes).

Even in the case of *L4D* and *B4B*'s emergent play, which arises from their AIs' ostensibly unpredictable deployment of zombies, this emergence has been "designed for the joy of control and agency" (Švelch, 2013, p. 200), in which there is enough supposed unpredictability to give the player a fulfilling sense of agency in the apocalypse. In this way, zombie games become "allegories of the societies of control," including capitalist society, and "in many respects mirror [such societies'] all-encompassing logic, under which the unknown must be conquered" (Švelch, 2013, p. 203). The player finds fulfilment in their zombie labor here not because it is free from capitalist logic, but because it places the player in a more advantageous

position within those logics; one in which the player can control the means and mode of their (post-apocalyptic) work time.

The coziness of the saferoom in *L4D* and *B4B* is therefore situated as a reward for the players who have succeeded at productive, playful labor within intense yet conquerable capitalist work time. This is not to say zombie games are entirely void of gameplay which challenges capitalism (Kempner, 2020), but even while engaging those challenges we ought to consider what labor we are undertaking, in service to what, and what rewards the game offers for that labor. When leisure remains a reward for "getting the job done," registers as distinct from that "job," and can only allow access to cozy affect when one's job was "done well," capitalist logic remains somewhere within our interpretation and enjoyment of leisure, however discontent real capitalist work time may make us beyond our leisurely reprieves.

To summarize, in this article, I have explored how the cozy affect of the zombie survival game's saferoom is grounded in real-world acceptance of capitalism's self-sustaining work/leisure cycle. Even in the zombie apocalypse, it seems, cozy leisure time is only for laborers who have earned it.

Bibliography

Ash, J. (2013). Technologies of Captivation: Videogames and the Attunement of Affect. *Body & Society*, *19*(1), 27–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X11411737

Beckham, J.N. (2017). Entrepreneurial Leisure and the Microbrew Revolution: The Neoliberal Origins of the Craft Beer Movement. In: N. Chapman, J. Lellock, & C. Lippard (Eds.), *Untapped: Exploring the Cultural Dimensions of Craft Beer* (pp. 80–101). West Virginia University Press.

Bille, M. (2015). Hazy Worlds: Atmospheric Ontologies in Denmark. *Anthropological Theory*, *15*(3), 257–274. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499614564889

[CharityDiary]. (2021). The Safe Rooms NEED a Mini-Game to Play if People Are Going to be AFK'ing the Entire 3 Minutes Every Single Level. Also Pls Let Me Shop. [Forum post]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Back4Blood/comments/p043am/the_safe_rooms_need_a_minigame_to_play_if_people/ (accessed on March 3, 2024).

[Cremacious]. (2021). The Timer in the Safe House Needs to Be Decreased, and We Should Be Able to Vote Kick Idle Players. [Forum post]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Back4Blood/comments/qaq50u/the_timer_in_the_safe_house_needs_to_be_decreased/ (accessed on March 3, 2024).

Epp, M. (2020). Fantasies of Full Employment: Zombies, Video Games, and Violent Labour. In: S. Webly & P. Zackariasson (Eds.), *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay* (pp. 72–84). Routledge.

Fletcher, R. (2011). Sustaining Tourism, Sustaining Capitalism? The Tourism Industry's Role in Global Capitalist Expansion. *Tourism Geographies*, *13*(3), 443–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2011.570372

Fraiman, S. (2022). HGTV's *House Hunters* and the Right to Coziness. *Canadian Theatre Review*, *191*, 20–24.

Freeman-Mills, M. (2018). Mike Booth, the Architect of *Left 4 Dead*'s AI Director, Explains Why It's So Bloody Good. *Kotaku AU*. https://www.kotaku.com.au/2018/11/mike-booth-the-architect-of-left-4-deads-ai-director-explains-why-its-so-bloody-good/ (accessed on March 3, 2024).

Freud, S. (1919/1976). The "Uncanny" (trans. A. Strachey). *New Literary History*, *7*(3), 619–645.

Grimshaw, M. (2008). *The Acoustic Ecology of the First-Person Shooter*. VDM Verlag.

Jørgensen, K. (2020). *Dead Rising* and the Gameworld Zombie. In: S. Webly & P. Zackariasson (Eds.), *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay* (pp. 126–137). Routledge.

Kempner, B. (2020). Proliferation, Blockages, and Paths of Escape in *Resident Evil* and *Call of Duty*. In: S. Webly & P. Zackariasson (Eds.), *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay* (pp. 138–150). Routledge.

Martens, T. (2021). A Love Letter to Cozy Games, the Gentle Game Movement We Need Right Now. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-07-01/wholesome-games-movement-cozy-video-games-anti-violence (accessed on March 3, 2024).

Martin, S. (2020). The Art of Crafting the Perfect Videogame Saferoom. *PC Gamer*. https://www.pcgamer.com/the-art-of-crafting-the-perfect-videogame-safe-room/ (accessed on March 3, 2024).

McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. Penguin.

McKissack, F., & May, L. (2020). Running With the Dead: Speedruns and Generative Rupture in *Left 4 Dead 1* and *2*. *Games and Culture*, *15*(5), 544–564. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018821528

Owens, K. (2022). Composing the Hero: Musical Gender Construction of Fantasy RPG Heroes. *Press Start*, *8*(1).

Raymen, T. (2019). *Parkour, Deviance and Leisure in the Late-Capitalist City: An Ethnography*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Short, T.X., Ordon, A., Hurd, D., Howe, C., Forbes, J., Eiserloh, S., Diaz, J., Cook, D., & Meiners, R. (January 24, 2018). Cozy Games. *Lostgarden*. https://lostgarden.home. blog/2018/01/24/cozy-games/ (accessed on March 3, 2024).

Spittle, S. (2011). "Did This Game Scare You? Because it Sure as Hell Scared Me!" *F.E.A.R.*, the Abject and the Uncanny. *Games and Culture*, *6*(4), 312–326. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010391091

Stevens, J. (2021). Child of the Elder Blood: A Semiotics of Folklorism in the Soundtrack of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. *Games and Culture*, *16*(5), 538–556. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020914701

Švelch, J. (2013). Monsters by the Numbers: Controlling Monstrosity in Video Games. In: M. Levina & D.-M.T. Bui (Eds.), *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader* (pp. 193–208). Bloomsbury Academic.

Waszkiewicz, A., & Bakun, M. (2020). Towards the Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *12*(3), 225–240. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00017_1

Youngblood, J. (2022). A Labor of (Queer) Love: Maintaining "Cozy Wholesomeness" on Twitch During COVID-19 and Beyond. *Television & New Media*, *23*(5), 531–541. https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764221080966

Ludography

Capcom. (1996). *Resident Evil*. Capcom.

Crystal Dynamics. (2013). *Tomb Raider*. Square Enix Europe.

FromSoftware. (2011). *Dark Souls*. Namco Bandai Games.

FromSoftware. (2022). *Elden Ring*. Bandai Namco Entertainment.

Heart Machine. (2016). *Hyper Light Drifter*. Heart Machine.

Klei Entertainment. (2013). *Don't Starve*. Klei Entertainment.

Kojima Productions. (2019). *Death Stranding*. Sony Interactive Entertainment.

PlatniumGames. (2017). *Nier: Automata*. Square Enix.

Red Hook Studios. (2016). *Darkest Dungeon*. Red Hook Studios

Valve Corporation. (2008). *Left 4 Dead*. Valve Corporation.

Valve Corporation. (2009). *Left 4 Dead 2*. Valve Corporation.

Turtle Rock Studios. (2021). *Back 4 Blood*. Warner Bros. Games.

Caighlan Smith is a PhD candidate and Vanier Scholar with the English Department of Memorial University of Newfoundland, holding a B.A. (Hons.) in English from Memorial University and an MLitt (with Distinction) in Fantasy from the University of Glasgow. She currently researches power dynamics, gender, and hero narratives in videogames.

Krzysztof Chmielewski* (iD)

Jakub Majewski** (iD)

Brewing Happiness Design Aspects of Coffee Representation in Cozy Games

Abstract

This paper examines the way coffee is represented and used in cozy games. As a genre, cozy games are defined by the concepts of safety, abundance, and softness, which together establish a sense of coziness. Coffee, commonly associated with casual and friendly social situations, has a potential to be a strong contributor to coziness within cozy games. To explore this, the authors identified 27 cozy games containing coffee-related elements, and then performed a qualitative analysis on their content. The analysis found it was comparatively rare for coffee themes to strongly impact the overall game experience; however, there was a significant tendency for coffee to amplify the game's overall sense of coziness.

Keywords: cozy games, coffee, brewing, game design, game analysis, qualitative analysis

* Kazimierz Wielki University, e-mail: k.chmielewski@ulricgames.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8927-1207
** Kazimierz Wielki University, e-mail: qmajewski@yahoo.co.uk, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3183-8119

Introduction

Of games and coffee

The goal of this paper is to examine the confluence between the genre of cozy games and the cultural significance of the beverage of coffee. To this purpose, the authors examine in what capacity coffee appears and is represented in cozy games. Considering the way coffee as a beverage tends to be associated with casual, friendly social situations, the initial research question is: do cozy games make use of rituals relating to coffee as a mechanic to build an atmosphere of coziness?

The paper begins with an examination of the historical usage of coffee as a game feature, which can be traced all the way back to the early 1980s; across various genres, coffee or coffee-drinking have been used as a power-up, a resource, or simply a narrative moment. Subsequently, the ideas of coziness, cozy games, and coffee are examined considering existing literature. The main part of the paper then presents a framework used to review the motif of using coffee across 27 cozy games, and the qualitative results of this analysis, emphasizing especially the way coffee is applied within specific game mechanics, and the way coffee is symbolically connected to coziness in games.

The aim of the research was to verify the hypothesis concerning the significance of coffee representation in cozy games as a key element of building coziness. The analysis sought to examine the issue from three perspectives: game studies, cultural studies, but also game design theory. Thus far, coffee has not been examined as a motif in cozy games in detail, but both its quantitative representation in the genre and the spectrum of its meanings vis-à-vis coziness indicated the need for such an analysis.

The results of this research thus indicate a significance of coffee in cozy games across three layers: aesthetic, narrative, and mechanical. We have also noted areas where the coffee motif is especially key in user experience design.

Coffee and games: A history

Coffee – brewing, serving, and drinking it – has been a part of videogame culture since at least the 1980s. Videogames like *Kung-Fu Master* (Irem, 1984) and *Double Dragon* (Technos, 1987) featured coffee as a power-up collectible replenishing the player's health. In the last two decades of the 20th century, some PC videogames contained a coffee-related motif in their gameplay, such as brewing the perfect espresso. As videogame technology evolved, coffee continued to appear in various forms. In the 2000s, games like *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000) and *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2002) featured coffee-drinking as a social activity, allowing players to invite friends to conversation over for a cup of coffee.

There is a wide variety of symbolism of coffee in videogames. For instance, in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) an invitation for some "hot coffee" represents a sexual offer. A mod called *Hot Coffee* (2005) enabled players to access sexual graphic content that, although abandoned by the game's creators, remained hidden in the game. Subsequently, the mod survived the post-release disabling patches and resurrected in *GTA IV* (*Rockstar Games,* 2008) as a Warm Coffee achievement description: *Have a successful date with a girlfriend to get invited into her house.*

In many games, coffee (the beverage) is a resource able to boost one or more aspects of the PCs' performance, such as their stamina (e.g., Matapang Coffee in *Cyberpunk 2077* [CD Projekt, 2020], coffee in *Red Dead Redemption II* [Rockstar Games, 2018]). In others, it is something one needs to grow, produce, exploit, and sell (e.g., the *Victoria* series [Paradox Interactive, 2003–2022]). However, this article will not take that latter group into consideration because of the low impact of the coffee for the overall gameplay and/or user experience. Some videogames use the motif of coffee-drinking to justify the main plot – a crown example would be *Coffee Crawl* (Vectorinox, 2018), an RPG Maker action roguelike with RPG elements, in which the protagonist uses coffee to stay awake in a world affected by a sleep epidemic. This is an interesting case – access to coffee beans is crucial from the narrative perspective but in no way does it impact the gameplay, meaning that coffee could have been replaced by any other resource without significant changes to the game's aesthetics or mechanics.

Coffee-drinking scenes are also frequently used in non-cozy games as an interlude between high-tension gameplay parts. In *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks, 2017)*,* the protagonist takes his time brewing and pouring coffee – these coffee breaks constitute the coziest moments in the game, which, as a survival horror, is definitely far from the cozy genre. The same application can be observed in other games, including *Deadly Premonition* (Access Games, 2010).

Getting cozy

Cozy videogames are a relatively new game genre but they are gaining popularity. They can be briefly introduced as games that pose challenges without raising the players' stress (which is achieved, among other things, by avoiding negative in-game feedback) and overall enable users to experience a feeling of coziness. At this point coziness will be addressed as a scale of how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness (Short et al., 2018). Since before the recognition of cozy games as a genre, coffee has been a staple beverage used in videogames to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

While there are few texts on the representation of coffee in videogames (see Werth, 2021), we encountered very few works specifically exploring the coffee motif in cozy games. The concept of coziness has a great potential to be represented through coffee and coffee-related rituals. From the authors' perspective, cozy games seem to be the most natural site for coffee-related motifs. It is here that the symbolic meaning of coffee seems to be the most visible, as well as most visibly affecting game mechanics. This thesis already resounds with some academic voices (e.g., Waszkiewicz, 2021).

Given the nature of the present volume, the authors do not attempt to explicate the concept of cozy games here; that said, it is still worth noting that, while the term was first introduced around 2016, there has been an ongoing discussion on videogame coziness, even though it has also been known under different names such as *wholesome games* (Knight, 2019). For the purposes of the present paper, and similarly to existing research, the term "cozy games" should be understood here in agreement with the definition put forward by the Project Horseshoe collective (Project Horseshoe, 2017), with one distinction mentioned below. According to Short et al., then, the essence of cozy videogames can be summarized in three complementary aspects:

a) safety – absence or minimization of risk (resulting in not inducing fear-triggered decisions and feelings)

b) abundance – as opposed to city builders, business simulators, etc., cozy games avoid the scarcity of resources. "Nothing is lacking, pressing or imminent" (Short et al., 2018).

c) softness – the aspect of softness of cozy games in the perspective adopted in this study is not limited to the aesthetics of the game, but can be represented simultaneously by game art, story, mechanics, game pacing, and even user interface design. As the cited definition was put forward at the end of 2017, while the needs fulfilled by cozy games are gaining in significance both in terms of the player community and their market segment, the meaning of "softness" is treated expansively here. Any uncertainty is resolved by considering the importance of softness for the overall player experience in the given title.

Research objectives

Recognition of cozy games as a genre has immense potential in the work towards understanding the players' needs and mapping them out in existing gamer taxonomies, e.g., the Gamer Motivation Model by Quantic Foundry or Richard Bartle's player typology. Secondly, by introducing a previously unexplored set of player needs, habits, and expectations, further research on cozy games and

their audiences will most likely accelerate the process of revision of the older classifications, like Richard Bartle's (1996) taxonomy, that do not seem to fully cover the variety of player approaches and needs. Understanding cozy games can initiate a transformation of what Juho Hamari and Janne Tuunanen (2012) describe as psychographic segmentation in player taxonomies (2012, pp. 2–3). The need to explore the role of coffee in cozy videogames is also, frankly, driven by the authors' own interest in coffee representation in digital media and in how coffee can be transposed into gameplay in a videogame.

There is, of course, a wealthy body of research on the social practices surrounding beverages, including coffee; such texts examine the beverage of choice from various perspectives, including their history and social roles. Then, there are also myriad other concerns such as business, power relations and structures, especially with regards to the role played by specific beverages in colonial dynamics – an issue certainly important for coffee. Among the numerous works discussing these topics specifically in the context of coffee, there is a consensus on the critical role of coffee as a social drink and the coffeehouse as a social venue (c.f. Fregulia, 2019; Morris, 2019; Kerr, 2021), though rarely in the specific context of coziness. If anything, the social history of coffee focuses on the opposite: Gordon Kerr (2021) begins his book with a series of quotes labeling coffee as a revolutionary drink which makes people think, which enlivens the tired and keeps the exhausted awake. Conversely, Kerr then notes coffee was "the conduit for good conversation and relaxation and escape from the cares of the long, hot day" (Kerr, 2021, p. 9). Coffee thus manages to combine two different strands of association – it is a revolutionary, awakening drink, simultaneously providing space for escape and comfort, especially when in dialogue with another person. The former aspect of exhilaration could be found in the earlier-cited titles where coffee is used as a power-up for players; the latter aspect can be expected in cozy games.

While there is ample research on coffee in general, our research has found that the coffee motif not only in videogames, but even in the broader area of comparative studies in coffee culture between East and West (or rather on the North-South axis, as will become clear), is visibly underrepresented. Furthermore, most of the prominent works from the last five years come from the global South and concern those markets (e.g. Nyu, 2019; Turyasingura & Agaba, 2022; Özkök & Erbay, 2022). The scale of research gaps in the topic of coffee culture becomes clear when the related literature is compared with the numerous works in the overall field of food studies, both treating coffee as a unique cultural element and examining it as a reflection of other aspects of culture. It is also important to note the cross-pollination between food- and game studies (e.g., Ensslin, 2011), which was recently explored in the volume *Delicious Pixels: Food in Videogames*

(Waszkiewicz, 2020). This source is especially noteworthy given that the author of the volume also studies cozy games (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020).

Finally, a word is needed on the power dynamics around coffee production, or more specifically – on why these topics are omitted here. The authors acknowledge that the history of coffee is intricately tied with colonial oppression and slavery (c.f. Fregulia, 2019). However, this is not in any way an intrinsic aspect of coffee, which in the mountains of New Guinea has also been giving economic freedom to small landholders in postcolonial societies (e.g. Downs, 1986). In any case, while the concerns of postcolonial studies are certainly an important research lens, they are better applied on the aforementioned game genres where coffee is used as a resource. These titles, though, are beyond the scope of the text.

The results of this research thus indicate a notable significance of coffee in cozy games across three layers: aesthetic, narrative, and mechanical. We have also noted areas where the coffee motif is especially key in user experience design.

Methodology

In choosing the games to study, the authors adopted two basic criteria. Firstly, the chosen games had to be identifiable as cozy games according to the basic definitions mentioned here. Secondly, coffee-drinking, rather than coffee as such, had to be of narrative or ludic significance; the games presenting coffee only as a product or resource (e.g., games where coffee is one of the common cultivables) were not taken into consideration.

With regards to cozy games, it is worthwhile to recall here the significance of empathy in their design. Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan (2010) distinguish two kids of empathy while designing videogames – cognitive and emotional. While cognitive empathy is quite self-explanatory, their understanding of emotional empathy as a paradigm for videogame design is especially helpful while discussing cozy games. As emotional empathy "invokes a psychological reaction in the recipient, allowing them to understand what another person is feeling" (Wäppling, Walchshofer, & Lewin, 2022, pp. 6–7), it can be particularly useful in terms of providing players with tools for self-reflection, which is an important aspect of the aforementioned manifesto of cozy games (Short et al., 2018). Furthermore, Belman and Flanagan divide emotional empathy into two categories: parallel, understood as the player feeling the same emotions as their avatar, and reactive, where the player experiences a different feeling as a response to the emotional impact of the scene (Belman & Flanagan, 2010).

The authors had to narrow down the category of cozy games to the titles that subjectively fit the Project Horseshoe definition the best. This almost excluded simulation games, where gameplay involving time management and scarcity of

resources positions these titles close to the very end of the coziness spectrum. It must be noted, however, that even simulators can contain significant cozy elements that are sometimes associated with the coffee motif. Nonetheless, they hardly affect the overall character of the game. As such, simulators are best considered separately from the present research, since the focus on cozy games requires here the design of a specific analysis instrument as described below.

To establish the importance of coffee both as a consumers' treat and a social ritual, the authors, after reviewing the literature, took a next step: manual keyword search in leading game platforms. The keywords searched for included #coffee #brewing #roasting #caffeteria #caffeine; the search was conducted across Steam and Good Old Games (GOG) platforms. These two platforms offered a broad – although certainly not exhaustive – overview of games falling within the scope of this article's interest. Whereas the authors focused on the PC games, they recognize the value of conducting similar research within Nintendo Switch store, as the console is a home platform to several console-exclusive cozy titles such as the *Animal Crossing* franchise.

Beyond keyword searches, it was decided a priori that any titles already known to the authors as being appropriate to the study would be incorporated even if they did not come up in search results. While a rigid search system is crucial in terms of maintaining research replicability, given the exploratory nature of the present study, the authors felt this would be the most appropriate to maximize the range of titles examined.

Once a set of titles containing significant coffee usage had been defined, it was divided into two categories: games that clearly match the definition of cozy games, and games that, while not fully adhering to the cozy game concept, nonetheless contain strong elements of coziness. However, the latter category of games was not included in the results' summary table.

Subsequently, the results were compared with the number of non-cozy but identifiably coffee-related titles on Steam and GOG to determine whether cozy games (or games with strong elements of coziness) have a statistically stronger presence within independent titles than in mainstream games. A total of 719 titles were identified on Steam using the indicated keywords, which constituted less than 1.4% of 52,100+ available titles (https://store.steampowered.com/charts/). Further content analysis narrowed the sample pool down to 268 games, i.e., 0.51% of all games available on the platform. At the timeframe of this research, between 7986 and 7994 PC games were available on GOG, of which a total of 22 games were identified using the keywords; this constituted about 0.275% of the collection.

Given the absence of a cozy game category in both platforms, it was difficult to determine exact numbers of games falling under the label, which made it impossible to compare the two platforms in this regard. Nonetheless, Steam clearly constitutes

the main source, especially with a sharp recent increase in titles: just three years ago, there were only around 10,000 titles, while as of May 2024, the number exceeds 100,000. Around 80% of titles available on Steam were developed and/or released at a time when cozy games were already identifiable as a genre.

In the third stage, the identified games were played; the authors' play was augmented by 'let's play' videos and by reading user reviews. For each game, top 10 positive, negative, and mixed reviews on Steam were selected, ranked by their utility rating (user scores) in the 11.04–06.05.2023 timeframe. The 'let's play' videos and video reviews employed in the study are indicated in the bibliography.

Subsequently, the games were classified based on the relevance level of the coffee-related motifs. The classification consisted of four factors or aspects:

A. Coffee motif – the number of coffee-themed loops/storylines/motifs, considered from either a game or narrative design perspective, divided by the average time of gameplay, as per data given by the publishers or in official reviews. Then the outcomes were grouped depending on the result and recalibrated down to a 3-point significance scale (0–2 points).

B. Experience – the influence of coffee-related activities on the overall user experience, on a scale from 0 to 3 points. The authors adapted the three previously described elements of cozy games, along with the additional criteria, for significance in conjuring the user experience strictly connected to the game's overall theme. Thus understood, significance is what designer Jesse Schell calls the resonance – "figuring out a theme and using every means to support that theme" (Schell, 2008, p. 49). One point was awarded for the presence of each of the three coziness factors (safety, abundance, softness), if they generated resonance, and constituted a gameplay component. Elements functioning outside of the main game space were rejected here.

C. Coziness – this criterium, once again considered on a 0–3 scale, was constructed in a simplified manner by analyzing whether the coffee-related elements of the game evoked safety, abundance and softness in line with the coziness definition. The important distinction between coziness as defined here and experience as defined in B above is that here coziness refers specifically and exclusively to the evocation of coziness by the coffee-related elements of the game.

D. Design aspects – specifically applied to coffee-related elements in the game mechanics, narrative, and game art, with 0 or 1 point added for the presence of coffee in each of these aspects of game development.

It must be stressed that any attempts to build a classification around concepts as intangible as coziness have to be subjective. After all, the definition of cozy games remains a subject of discussions precisely because of this reason. The authors' attempts to classify games within the categories above are subjective and carry

the risk of error, while another researcher might justifiably come up with entirely different assessments. Given the exploratory nature of the presented study, the authors preferred remaining open to this risk, rather than searching for a more objective, therefore more narrow and focused categorization.

The above methodology allows to qualitatively examine the way different games employ coffee motifs to support specific elements of coziness, as well as to analyze the way they are embedded in the game from a game design perspective. Even though the analysis instrument still requires the researcher to make subjective decisions on the perceived presence and strength of these elements, this methodology provides a way to objectify this subjective process.

Results

In the research process, the authors played, watched, and/or read 27 videogames, assessing various constituents over a total of ca. 160 hours of gameplay. Not all the titles proved to be fertile ground for the exploration of coffee. Table 1 lists the nine titles which yielded noticeable results in the classification based on the four essentials of coffee significance. The keys to the elimination of the remaining 18 titles were:

- irrelevance of coffee representation (no influence on the gameplay and/or overall user experience),
- the game using coffee to support elements that contradict the definition of coziness, thus resulting in a game experience that, even if still fulfilling the overall definition of a cozy game, was setting the coffee against it (e.g., time pressure in *My Cafe* [2016] or player exclusion in *Neko Maid* [2022]).

Table 1. Summarized classification results for coffee theme significance.

Game title	Year of release	Coffee theme significance by				
		coffee presence	experience	coziness	design aspects	total
Coffee Talk	2020	2	3	2	3	10
Coffee Talk Episode 2	2023	2	2	1	3	8
Necrobarista. Final Pour	2021	2	3	2	1	8
Caffeine: Victoria's Legacy	2020	2	2	1	2	7
My Time at Portia	2018	1	1	1	2	5
Persona 5	2016	0	1	1	2	4
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	2020	1	1	0	2	4
Unpacking	2021	0	1	2	1	4
Stardew Valley	2011	1	0	0	1	2
Average:		1.22	1.56	1.11	1.89	5.78

It would be difficult to begin the discussion without looking back to the most representative examples of the genre. In *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), undoubtedly one of the most popular cozy farming games, coffee is a significant resource both from the perspective of the game mechanics and the narrative. Players can plant coffee, process the beans, make coffee; they can drink it or sell it to other game characters. The finished product provides an 83-second speed buff. The game also includes specific coffee-related items – the Hot Java Ring, when equipped, increases the player's chance for coffee loot after killing a monster by 25%, while the Coffee Maker's award is a free cup of coffee daily.

Being the only resource counted in Kegs, coffee is not considered an Artisan Good, and as such cannot be sold in the General Store. From the narrative perspective, coffee is a tool for cozy breaks and a socializer. Coffee is the only good in Stardrop Saloon described with an evaluative component: "It smells delicious. This is sure to give you a boost" (Coffee, n.d.).

In the aesthetic layer, brewing and serving coffee is not particularly different from other activities, though there is a clear message in scenes depicting coffee-drinking: apart from purely mechanical aspects, it offers a relaxing break from more demanding tasks. This mechanic is emphasized by the fact that, though coffee can serve as a dye or a resource to produce shirts, neither the coffee bean nor the brewed drink is ever used as a quest item.

In *Persona 5* (Altus, 2016), Café Leblanc is a location where the protagonist can rest between levels. There, they can renew the Spirit Points, one of the most important statistics in the game, by serving and brewing a coffee. This café plays another notable role – its location on the peripherals allows the player to listen to a relaxing soundtrack. Finally, Café Leblanc is the launch pad for the PC's party, the Phantom Thieves. If the owner, Sojiro, is absent –typically after dusk – the player can brew coffee independently; that renews the Spirit Points for all members of the hero's party.

The next title, *Caffeine: Victoria's Legacy* (Kikai Digital, 2020) is a visual novel in which coffee is foregrounded as part of the protagonist's core motivation. As the game tells us: "[t]he protagonist Taka is in search of what happened to his mum, who disappeared from his life just before his 6th birthday. Ever since then, Taka has lost all memories of his past. His only memory is a little coffee house in the corner of an alley, where his parents happily brewed coffee and served customers from all walks of life". Despite treating coffee as its primary theme, *Caffeine* . . . limits the support of coffee symbolics to the game's coziness. And it does so in a potent way – using coffee as a symbol of a happy childhood or even the hero's internal balance; yet, the emotional capacity of the story is dissipated in the gameplay.

Another significant case is *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020; AC:NH). The players can "drop by for coffee" by visiting someone else's island;

it is an important aspect of socialization and an in-game mechanic, allowing the players to control the game's pacing. A similar scheme is also visible in *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Game, 2020), a cozy adventure game which features scene of characters engaging in heartfelt conversation with the protagonist over a cup of coffee. Regardless the parallelism to *AC:NH*, it was not taken into consideration in this study; *Spiritfarer*'s coffee scenes are functionally just cutscenes, lacking in player agency. By contrast, in *AC:NH*, when returning home from a quest, we may visit The Roost for coffee; here, besides a conversation with Brewster (a quest summary intended to amplify the player's sense of achievement), the game also offers inviting other NPCs to socialize around coffee. This is a simple example of a mechanic that creates or augments the player's experience, without grounding in gameplay.

Unpacking (Witch Beam, 2021) fully matches the definition of cozy games. This is an interesting case: while in terms of a genre, it is categorized as a simulator, it turns into an *anti-simulator* when one considers the user experience: the resource limitations exert no pressure on the user, the aesthetics do not amplify a sense of time constraint, and the user's progress is quite subjective. There is no binary success/failure in the main questline, nor is there a progression tree as one might expect from a simulator. The coffee shows up in *Unpacking* as a Rare achievement: "brew some coffee"; after unpacking the coffee maker and other necessary equipment, the player can make and drink some coffee with no effect on the mechanics or story – just for pure pleasure of the activities.

The two episodes of *Coffee Talk* (2020–2023; CT) are challenging to summarize as the symbolics of coffee is literally flowing over. The social phenomenon of a coffee shop as a symbolic safe space to share personal stories is a clue of the gameplay. That said, whereas in the first part of the game the story revolves around coffee, *Episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly* introduces another experience both in aesthetics and the nature of the interactions; further possibilities of world exploration amidst the calming sound effects and music keep the coziness of the gameplay activities unrelated to coffee.

Necrobarista: Final Pour (2021; NFP) can be compared to *Coffee Talk* in terms of intensity of the coffee theme and its significance to overall user experience, but NFP's aesthetics are much farther from coffee than the CT series. In NFP, the coffee shop is a literal threshold (in its traditional, hero's journey-oriented meaning); yet there is no clear distinction in the artwork or music between the intro and the coffee shop.

In *My Time at Portia* (2018), the Portia Café is an inaccessible location, used by one of the NPCs to sleep or relax. This shows how little importance coffee bears to the gameplay in this title.

While researching games for this text, the authors found some drinks on the way – cozy games in the making. One upcoming title, potentially important in the discussion on coffee-themed cozy games, is *Affogato* – an indie RPG with tower defense mechanics made by Befun Studio. It is being introduced by its developers as a *Cozy Coffee Shop RPG*. The teasers show the importance of grinding and brewing the coffee. The coffee shop as a safe space for social gatherings, as well as serving the coffee to build or maintain relationships, are portrayed as crucial: *Mind treating your old friend to a cup of coffee?* (Davidinc RPGs, 2023).

There is at least one more beverage-themed cozy game worth mentioning. Like *Affogato*, *Pekoe* is still in development but its release date keeps being moved. "Pekoe is a cute cat-filled tea-making simulation game about taking the time for self-care and connecting with the things that make you happy" (Pekoe Presskit, n.d.). The game is oriented towards slowness and ritual perfection, clearly in reference to tea culture proper to the Global South (see below). The game depicts the tea journey from plantation, through processing, brewing, and finally to serving. It reveals many tea rituals, worthy of mention because none of the games reviewed in this paper have devoted any attention to this aspect, even when allowing coffee to be served. The authors suspect this gap will soon be filled.

Conclusion

This analysis revealed that while it is comparatively rare for coffee to impact the overall game experience, the coffee-focused games certainly tend to use the coffee for amplifying the game's overall coziness. The primary symbolic meaning of coffee seems to differ between the coffee-oriented games and the cozy games containing just coffee-related narrative elements. While the latter treat coffee as a positively associated resource, power-up, or reward, the former emphasize the social interactions constructed around brewing, pouring, and drinking coffee.

In this regard, one can observe a dichotomy between cozy videogames and games that merely include any cozy elements (usually aside from the main storyline). Both types use coffee to enhance the coziness. However, while cozy videogames – if they use the theme of coffee at all – support the coffee-related cozy elements with the game story, the analyzed games containing a limited amount of recognizably cozy coffee-themed features tended to implement the aesthetic aspects of coffee in the game. All studied games use the mechanics dedicated to coffee-related activities, but in cozy games those mechanics are significantly more present and connected to the protagonist's skillset and/or backstory (except for *The Unpacking*, explained earlier).

While it might seem that the role of coffee in these games could be filled by any other beverage, like tea, their images in the Global North and South are somewhat

different. The literature frequently discusses the Global East and South's association of coffee-drinking culture with Westernization. As Wang (2022, p. 27) argues, "By drinking coffee, Chinese people absorb the enthusiastic and romantic adventure spirit of Westerners". Ayo Oniku and Olamide Akintemehin (2020) make similar claims regarding Nigeria, while John Bosco Turyasingura and Moses Agaba (2022) point at the changing coffee culture in Uganda as an adaptation of the Western values represented by coffee. One of the authors has – coincidentally – travelled extensively through South East Africa, observing that while Zambia, Tanzania, and Kenya developed a strong coffee plantation market, the locals appear to mainly drink processed coffee (Africafe/Nescafe). Ironically, while coffee came to China from the West, Africa tells a different story: coffee as a beverage either originated in Ethiopia and then got transmitted to the Middle East, or was discovered in the Arabian Peninsula; in either case, it was traded throughout East Africa by Arabs under the Omani Empire – before being replaced by tea under Western (British) rule.

Contrary to the above, Safitri Dini and Anna Nada (2022) have argued that while coffee culture arrived in Indonesia recently, it has no clear relation to the Western consumerist microculture. This claim is backed up by the coffee shops and cafes offering specialty-quality coffee. It may also be noted that coffee-drinking, rare in Indonesia, did not begin with Western influence, but again can be traced centuries backwards to the large-scale Islamization of Indonesia spread by Arabic trade across the Indian Ocean.

Finally, there is a multitude of different rituals existing for one beverage among different cultures, like one symbol may carry different meanings. This is highlighted by Shichao Wang (2022), who argues Chinese tea lovers find tranquility, purity, and self-cultivation in their tea-related rituals, whereas the Western tea brings enthusiasm, boldness and convenience.

The present paper is only an initial, exploratory foray into the topic at hand. The authors recommend further research to examine, both more deeply and more broadly, the connection between coffee and cozy games, as well as perhaps an even broader look at what digital games in general have to say about coffee and coffee culture. Furthermore, it would be natural to expand this investigation to examine and/or compare to coffee other beverages like chai/tea, yerba mate, cocoa, etc. Finally, it may also be worthwhile to build a connection between the very rich field of alcohol studies and game studies; however, given that alcohol only rarely connects with coziness, this strand of research would inevitably lead beyond cozy games.

Coffee culture in the Global South is currently undergoing transformation and expansion, as indicated by scholars, media, and financial reports alike (e.g., Wiraseto, 2016). Indeed, coffee is forcing out other traditional drinks in their social

functions (see Erbay, 2002). When considering cozy games, a genre especially popular in East Asia – as indicated both by the geography of sales on Steam and the numerous Japanese and Korean indie studios developing such games – titles dealing with other beverages (chai/tea, yerba mate, etc.), are very poorly represented. This may suggest coffee symbolizes values more representative of the preferences of the videogame generation or is simply preferred by this generation. Such a hypothesis is beyond the current article, but worth examining. To consider a deeper examination of the values and symbolic meaning of coffee compared to other beverages in cozy games, one would need to examine the geographic and ethnic/cultural origins of both the players and the developers. This would be vital to establish what the values and preferences of the developers are and what audience they cater to. While this line of examination is not necessary in a study of the intensity of coffee representation in cozy games, it would be a prerequisite in any broader exploration of the cultural issues and causes of the depiction of coffee as described in this article.

Bibliography

Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs. *Journal of MUD Research*, *1*(1), 19.

Belman, J., & Flanagan, M. (2010). Designing Games to Foster Empathy. *Cognitive Technology*, *14*(2), 5–15.

Coffee. (n.d.). *Stardew Valley Wiki*. Online: https://stardewvalleywiki.com/Coffee (accessed on April 11, 2023).

Czarniecka-Skubina, E., Pielak, M., Sałek, P., Korzeniowska-Ginter, R., & Owczarek, T. (2021). Consumer Choices and Habits Related to Coffee Consumption by Poles. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(8).

Davidinc RPGs. (2023, February 6). Affogato Demo: Spotlight – *A Cozy Coffee Shop RPG* [Video]. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dL2QUk_kGCg&ab_channel=Davidvinc

Downs, I. (1986). *The Last Mountain: A Life in Papua New Guinea*. University of Queensland Press.

Ensslin, A. (2011). Do Avatars Dream of Electric Steak? Videogames and the Gendered Semiotics of Food. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *3*(1), 37–50.

Fregulia, J.M. (2019). *A Rich and Tantalizing Brew: A History of How Coffee Connected the World*. The University of Arkansas Press.

Garner, B. (2015). Interpersonal Coffee-Drinking Communication Rituals. *International Journal of Marketing and Business Communication*, *4*(4).

Jenkins, H. (2006), Game Design as Narrative Architecture. In K. Salen & E. Zimmerman (Eds.), *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* (pp. 670–690). The MIT Press.

Kerr, G. (2021). *A Short History of Coffee*. Oldcastle Books.

Knight, A. (2019). Reap What You Sow: The Seed and the Harvest of Wholesome Games. *The Lifted Brow*, 44, 5–8.

Morris, J. (2019). *Coffee: A Global History*. Reaktion Books.

Oniku, A., & Akintimehin, O. (2021). Coffee Culture: Will Nigerians Drink Coffee Like others? *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences*, *4*(3), 236–250.

Özkök, G., & Erbay, M. (2022). Coffee as an International Beverage and its Influence on Cultural Communication. *Socrates Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Studies*, *15*, 119–136.

Pekoe Presskit (n.d.). *Kitten Cup Studio*. https://www.kittencupstudio.com/press-kit (accessed on August 28, 2024).

Project Horseshoe (2017). Group Report: Coziness in Games: An Exploration of Safety, Softness and Satisfied Needs. *Project Horseshoe*. https://www.project horseshoe.com/reports/featured/Project_Horseshoe_2017_report_section_3.pdf (accessed on April 22, 2023).

Ramanathan R., & Ali, N. (2021). Coffee Consumption and the Sustainability of the Coffee Industry in Malaysia. *Trends in Undergraduate Research*, *4*(2).

Safitri D., & Nada, A. (2022). The Trend of Drinking Coffee Culture as Indonesian Culture. In *Proceeding The 2nd ICHELSS* (pp. 117–125).

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004), *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. The MIT Press.

Shaker Ardekani, R., & Rath, J. (2017). Coffee People in Tehran, Glasgow and Amsterdam. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *20*(1), 122–140.

Sullivan, A., Stanfill, M., & Salter, A. (2023). The Constraints of Cozy Games: *Boyfriend Dungeon* and Consent in Queer Play. In P. Lopes, F. Luz, A. Liapis, & H. Engström (Eds.), *FDG'23: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. Association for Computing Machinery.

Topik, S. (2009). Coffee as a Social Drug. *Cultural Critique*, *71*, 81–106.

Turyasingura, J.B., & Agaba, M. (2022). Social-Cultural Factors and Coffee Consumption in Rukungiri District Uganda. *Quest Journals: Journal of Research in Business and Management*, *10*(10), 207–215.

Waern, A., & Back, J. (2015). Experimental Game Design. In P. Lankoski & S. Björk (Eds.), *Game Research Methods: An Overview* (pp. 341–353). ETC Press.

Wang, S. (2022). The Differences and Integration between Tea Culture and Coffee Culture. *Studies in Linguistics and Literature*, *6*(3), 22–28.

Wäppling, A., Walchshofer, L., & Lewin, R. (2022). *What Makes a Cozy Game? A Study of Three Games Considered Cozy* [Bachelor's thesis, Uppsala University]. M.A. thesis. Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet.

Waszkiewicz, A. (2022). *Delicious Pixels: Food in Videogames.* De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

Waszkiewicz A., & Bakun, M. (2020). Towards the Aethetics of Cozy Videogames. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *12*(3), 225–240.

Werth, T. (2021, September 18). Why Are There So Many Coffee-based Videogames? *QRUIS.* https://qrius.com/why-are-there-so-many-coffee-based-video-games/ (accessed on August 26, 2024).

Wiraseto, D. (2016). *Coffee United: Brewing for Harmony.* Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Indonesia.

Ludography

Access Games. (2010). *Deadly Premonition*. Access Games.

Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley*. Eric Barone a.k.a. ConcernedApe.

CD Projekt. (2020). *Cyberpunk 2077*. CD Projekt.

Chen, K. (2021). *Necrobarista. Final Pour*. Route 59.

DomislavDev. (2021). *Yerba Mate Tycoon*. DomislavDev.

Eguchi, K., Nogami, H., & Tezuka, T. (2002). *Animal Crossing* [GameCube]. Nintendo.

Hunny Bunny Studio. 2022. *Neko Maid*. Hunny Bunny Studio.

Kikai Digital. (2020). *Caffeine: Victoria's Legacy*. Kikai Digital.

Kishimoto, Y., Saiot, S., Kai, K., & Yamane, K. (1987). *Double Dragon* [Arcade]. Technos Japan.

Melsoft Games. (2016). *My Cafe – Recipes & Stories* [iPhone/iPad/PC]. Melsoft Games.

Nintendo. (2002). *Animal Crossing*. Nintendo.

Nintendo. (2020). *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [Switch]. Nintendo.

Nishikawa, S. (2017). *The Evil Within 2*. Tango Gameworks.

Nishiyama, T. & Miyamoto, S. (1984). *Kung Fu Master* [Arcade, NES]. Irem.

Obishaku, Y., Yamana, M., & Tawada, T. (2020). *Pokemon Cafe ReMix*. Genius Sonority.

P Studio. (2016). *Persona 5*. Atlus.

Paradox Entertainment. (2003). *Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun*. Paradox Interactive.

Pathea Games. (2018). *My Time at Portia*. Pathea Games.

Peachy Keen Games. (2020). *Calico*. Peachy Keen Games.

Rockstar Games. (2018). *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Rockstar Games.

Rockstar North. (2004). *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Rockstar Games.

Rockstar North. (2008). *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Rockstar Games.

Thunder Lotus Games. (2020). *Spiritfarer*. Thunder Lotus Games.

Toge Productions. (2020). *Coffee Talk*. Toge Productions.

Toge Productions. (2023). *Coffee Talk Episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly*. Toge Productions.

Vectorinox. (2018). *Coffee Crawl*. Vectorinox.

Witch Beam. (2021). *Unpacking*. Witch Beam.

Wright, W., Baity, S., Custer, J., Goss, M., Humble, R., Darga, M., London, Ch., Yang, M., Hunicke, R., Howe, H., Jalapayan, L., Holmberg-Weidler, E., Mazza, R., & Kalson, A. (2000). *The Sims*. Electronic Arts.

Authors' caffeine journal

The above text has been influenced by the following coffee types:

Authors' discussion – Kenya Zahabu, Burundi (manual drip, aeropress)

Game analysis – Colombia Bucaramanga, Ethiopia, Brasil Immaculada (espresso/americano)

Literature review – Zambia, Colombia Potosi XO, Tanzania (manual drip)

Krzysztof Chmielewski is Senior Lecturer of Game Design and Game Studies at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland. His research interests revolve around cultural symbolics in video games, game production studies, analog game studies and gaming law. Krzysztof has been a serious games producer since 2008 – from military simulators, through LARPs, board games, finally landing in the video games industry (for two reasons: passion and mortgage). For the past decade, his main objective has been teaching video game adepts at various universities in Poland, France, USA, and India. Lawyer and political scientist by education, coffee addict by choice.

Jakub Majewski is Assistant Professor of Games and Digital Culture at the Kazimierz Wielki University (PhD, Bond University). He teaches game and narrative design, as well as game studies. His research interests include game history, game narrative, worldbuilding, open-world role-playing games, and the intersection of games and cultural heritage. Outside of academia, he has two decades of experience in game development, across many genres and platforms.

Justin Buergi* ⒾⒹ

Idle Games: A Cozy Genre Turned Exploitative

A b s t r a c t

This paper explores the connection between cozy games and idle games, analyzing shared elements and underlying principles. Cozy games are characterized by an emphasis on comfort, relaxation, and safety, offering players an escape from the pressure of daily life through soothing gameplay experiences. Meanwhile, idle games feature waiting as a core mechanic, allowing progress to be made even in the player's absence. This provides a continuous sense of growth and progression throughout the player's day but may also lead to frequent engagements to optimize production. Furthermore, this desire for continuous progress may also be exploited by developers who capitalize on player impatience by incorporating microtransactions that expedite progression in exchange for real-world money. Thus, while idle games can fit within the cozy game genre, their monetization practices raise questions about ethical responsibility on the part of game developers and taint the genre's potential as a serene gaming experience.

Keywords: cozy, casual, idle, exploitation, microtransaction, optimization

Introduction

While the mention of video games typically conjures up images of exhilarating gameplay, wherein players strive to overcome physical challenges and obstacles, there is a growing interest in games that emphasize comfort, relaxation, and

---

*   Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, e-mail: buergj@rpi.edu, https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0555-6728

a profound sense of serenity. These games, known as cozy games or wholesome games, have emerged as a distinct genre that offers their players an escape from the pressures of daily life. Unlike their fast-paced counterparts, cozy games foster a state of tranquility through activities such as soothing puzzles and farming simulations.

Meanwhile, idle games, a subgenre within the realm of casual games, are characterized by a core mechanic of waiting, wherein progress continues to accumulate both with and without the player's presence, creating a consistent sense of growth and progression. Furthermore, while it may seem contradictory to refer to waiting as a mechanic when it is, in essence, a lack of interactions, idle games adeptly subvert this expectation. The genre's ever-present nature and complex economies allow the absence of direct engagement to be transformed into a nuanced interplay involving the management of impatience and strategies for optimization.

Within instances of the idle game genre, in-game currency is constantly accumulated and may be spent on upgrades that accelerate this production of resources. Notably, the prompt acquisition of optimal-choice upgrades, as identified by Erik D. Demaine et al. (2020), once they become available will ensure that production is optimized, thereby fostering a compelling incentive for players to regularly and frequently engage with the game. However, determining what action would be most optimal at any given point in an idle game will often prove difficult for players due to the large number of variables to consider. Additionally, impatience may drive players to return or spend prematurely, leading to sub-optimal decisions being made (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018).

Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman, in their book *Rules of Play*, define mechanics as "the basic game actions or set of actions that players repeat over and over as they play" (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2002, p. 579). This definition traditionally implies a need for physical interaction, yet the boundaries of what constitutes an action in gaming are increasingly expanding. Sonia Fizek, in her book *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic* (2022), explores play through a computer medium, delving into scenarios where players are not in direct control of the technology, such as in e-sports viewership or playing idle games. This broader interpretation of player interaction is particularly pertinent in the context of idle games. Unlike many casual games that use timers to limit play, idle games distinctively transform the act of waiting into a core gameplay mechanic. This transformation turns waiting into a strategic gameplay loop, where players are engaged in a continuous process of determining the most opportune moment to re-engage with the game and effectively utilize their accumulated resources.

However, this dynamic is often complicated by the introduction of micro-transactions, which present players with the choice of continuing to progress at their current pace or expediting the process by spending real-world money. This option fundamentally alters the gameplay experience, allowing players to pay to bypass the core mechanic of waiting and thus subverting the intended experience of gradual progression, while also raising ethical considerations about to manipulation of player impatience.

The incorporation of microtransactions within idle games presents a complex challenge to the genre's intrinsic gameplay experience, necessitating a nuanced shift in perspective to develop a better understanding of both how this exploitation occurs and the potential of idle games in the absence of such practices. This reevaluation uncovers significant parallels between idle and cozy games, particularly in their gameplay dynamics and the emotional responses that they elicit from players. This paper endeavors to contextualize idle games within the cozy game genre, focusing on an in-depth analysis of their shared elements and underlying principles. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the inherent nature of these games that stimulate frequent interactions, driving players to engage often and continuously with the genre to expedite progress. Finally, it will critically examine how developers exploit engagement dynamics, using microtransactions as a tool to maintain player involvement and incentivize financial expenditures.

Idle games

It is often challenging, if not impossible, to definitively pinpoint the origin of a genre as a result of shifting definitions and a multiplicity of interpretations (Derrida, 1967), but Eric Fredricksen's *Progress Quest* (2002) is widely acknowledged as one of the earliest instances of an idle game (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018; Deterding, 2016). This web-based game parodied the incessant grinding prevalent in most role-playing games (RPGs) of the time as well as the use of bots to circumvent these tedious elements by automating all aspects of gameplay beyond initial character creation. Following this step, the game is fully automated with the player's character going on adventures and quests that the player is unable to affect in any way, leaving them with nothing to do but watch progress be made. However, despite the satirical intent of its creator, many players gravitated toward the game and regularly returned to check on their progress. Sonia Fizek (2018) has examined this phenomenon through the lens of interpassivity, a media studies concept, centered on a piece of art or technology acting on the user's behalf. Here she argues that the act of automation in idle games frees the player from the responsibility of playing, while still granting them a sense of accomplishment for what the game achieved without their input. By tossing aside all extraneous elements, the game produced a

concentrated experience of endless progression, effectively emulating the sensation of progress found when playing RPGs.

These similarities have persisted as the genre has continued to evolve, with Nick Yee (2016) identifying a strong correlation between players of idle games and players of core RPGs, a fact that he attributed to the ability of idle games to "cleanly isolate the power progression and accumulation mechanics from the typical trappings of AAA RPGs" (para. 16). Moreover, Yee identified completion and power as the primary motivators for idle game players, whereas excitement and fantasy held the least amount of sway over their engagement. This finding underscores the inclination of idle game players to gravitate towards RPGs for the satisfaction derived from continual progress rather than for the allure of action or narrative. Such a preference aligns logically with idle games as they are a genre in which waiting constitutes a fundamental gameplay mechanic.

In idle games, the player's engagement typically consists of waiting for in-game currency to accumulate, spending it, and subsequently restarting the waiting process (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018). A notable exemplification of this concept is Ian Bogost's (2010) satirical Facebook game *Cow Clicker*, wherein the primary player interaction consists of clicking on a digital cow once and then waiting six hours to click on it again.

Waiting, however, is not unique to idle games as it is a rather common element of many casual games that would not be considered idle. *Candy Crush* (King, 2012), for example, is a popular casual game that restricts the player to a limited number of play sessions before they must wait for a timer to finish counting down. Consequently, waiting assumes a core role in this game, albeit in a manner where the player must wait until they are once more allowed to play rather than playing through the act of waiting.

In contrast, idle games commonly incorporate verisimilitude within the waiting process, wherein in-game currency accumulates in a manner that aligns more naturally with a player's mental model than an arbitrary timer counting down (Howe, 2017). This engenders a heightened sense of realism in the player, a feeling further amplified by the pervasive (Montola et al., 2009) nature of idle games, wherein in-game currency continues to accumulate whether the game is turned on or not (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018).

Upon the player's return to the game after a prolonged absence, calculations are performed to approximate and award the player an amount of in-game currency roughly equivalent to what they would have earned had the game been left running during that interval. Moreover, players are often prompted to return to the game via notifications, alerting them that a currency milestone has been reached, a task has been completed, or that they have simply not returned to the game in a certain amount of time (Larrson, 2019). Consequently, it has been posited that idle games

possess the ability to permeate every moment of a player's existence, effectively gamifying the concept of time itself (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018).

Moreover, often as players advance in idle games, upgrades will become available that reduce the frequency with which they must interact to advance either by extending the periods during which players may disengage without a loss in production or by automating aspects that were previously reliant on player involvement. Consequently, players find themselves freed from the need to interact, potentially leading to a sensation of boredom. However, this is not a mundane form of boredom characterized by aimless diversions or entertainment, but rather, as elucidated by Scott Richmond (2015), a profound boredom. This profound boredom affords users the opportunity and incentive to engage in thoughtful reflection and contemplation on the subject matter. Within this context, players gain the freedom to critically scrutinize the game's thematic elements and formulate strategies for future progression (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018; Buday et al., 2012).

In this paper, idle games will be defined as a genre characterized by the continuous growth and progression of in-game systems, even in the player's absence. This design aspect engenders a sense of achievement and accomplishment in the player, while also motivating them to return frequently and regularly to the game in order to optimize production.

Are idle games cozy?

Tanya X. Short et al.'s (2018) report explores the cozy game genre with the intention of providing a more comprehensive definition and deeper insights, asserting that cozy games are characterized by three main elements: safety, abundance, and softness.

Safety, in the context of cozy games, pertains to the absence of threats, difficult challenges, or the risk of losing progress. This aspect is prominently featured in idle games, where the absence of a game-over condition is considered a fundamental pillar of the genre (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018). Unlike most single-player games, no entity or event threatens the player or their progress, granting them freedom to explore the world and its mechanics without fear (Buday et al., 2012). Suboptimal decisions may be made by the player, providing a less-than-ideal boost in production (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018), but there is little risk of a careless decision costing them significantly. Instead, almost any action performed by the player will lead to a boost in production and growth (Deterding, 2019; Keogh & Richardson, 2018; Perdomo, 2021), regardless of the level of thought or effort invested into the decisions being made, making idle games, much like cozy games, accessible and enjoyable to players of all skill levels.

Abundance here relates to Abraham Maslow's (1943) work on the hierarchy of needs, which argued that love, esteem, and self-actualization cannot be experienced or sought until basic needs such as hunger or thirst are satisfied. In the case of idle games, abundance is achieved through automation, a prevalent mechanic of the genre. Often as players progress, the game increasingly handles tasks that previously demanded their attention, affording them the opportunity to contemplate the game's underlying themes or focus on strategic planning, now that their basic needs are being met (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018).

Finally, softness encompasses the visual, auditory, and sensory aspects of games. Cozy games aim not to stress or overstimulate players. In this regard, most idle games are designed for multiple short play sessions per day throughout extended periods, often months or years. Consequently, the art style and music are intentionally ambient, drawing no more attention than the player wishes to devote to it (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018). They are non-intrusive, and so the player is unlikely to grow bored or annoyed with them regardless of how long they play. Similarly, the gameplay may also be considered soft as it typically lacks strict time limits and instead allows players to proceed at their own pace. In its most ideal form, this grants players a sense of freedom, allowing them to progress without needing to engage with the game continuously and actively, but this is seldom how idle games are designed to be played.

Notably, many of the more recent instances of idle games feature a push-and-pull mechanic, regulating the amount of progress that can be achieved both during and between play sessions (Sadprasid et al., 2022). One such example of this push-and-pull mechanic is found in *Cookie Clicker* (Orteil, 2013). In this game, cookies are generated both by the player manually clicking on a giant cookie on the left-hand side of the screen and automatically by the game at set intervals. These cookies may then be spent on upgrades that increase the rate at which cookies are produced, but once the player has spent all their cookies, they must wait for more to spawn before their next purchase. As such, they are pushed from the game as no more progress can be made, and while the game continues to generate cookies while turned off, this is only for a limited time. After that time has passed, the game begins generating cookies at only a fraction of its regular rate, pulling the player back into the game to reset the timer and spend the accumulated cookies, thus restarting the cycle. This design encourages players to return every few hours to ensure a continuous accumulation of in-game currency, leading to short and frequent play sessions that provide players with consistent, incremental progress throughout their day with each return to the game offering a large helping of in-game currency and the possibility of unlocking new upgrades or achievements. However, even when progress is not halted, players still tend to return frequently to idle games.

In his effort to understand the frequent play sessions among the player base of *Cookie Clicker*, Sebastian Deterding (2019) referenced Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer's assertion that nothing is more motivating than "making meaningful progress" (Amabile & Kramer's, 2011, p. 93–98). In most idle games, players continuously achieve progress in various forms. While the gameplay may entail little more than clicking on a virtual cookie and waiting, such actions can lead to hundreds of different achievements and upgrades being unlocked. Consequently, players are consistently moving towards one or several new goals, allowing them to become highly engrossed by the process of repetitively clicking on a digital cookie to generate smaller digital cookies as doing so grants a constant sense of progression and achievement.

However, previous studies have shown that this sense of progression can prove rather compelling as players of idle games not only strive to achieve progress but also seek to do so as rapidly and efficiently as possible (Cutting et al., 2019; Ruffino, 2021; Spiel et al., 2019), driving players to return frequently to expedite their progress (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018; Larsson, 2019). Rather than treating idle games as a leisurely experience that allows for sporadic engagement according to personal schedules, players frequently revisit idle games multiple times a day, driven by the desire to purchase the most recently affordable upgrade to optimize production. The desire to maximize efficiency is in accordance with the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT), which posits that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that drive human behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this instance, each new achievement unlocked or upgrade purchased leads to a feeling of competence on the player's part and motivates them to repeat this process.

This behavior can be seen even in seemingly simple idle games. *Cow Clicker*, for example, limits the player to only being able to click on a cow once every six hours, but the faster they click on that cow once the timer ends, the faster the new timer begins. As such, a player may be motivated to stay up a bit late to click on the cow to ensure they do not lose out on six hours of potential progress while they sleep.

Additionally, players have also been observed dedicating their time away from idle games to strategize and plot, often seeking assistance from the game's community (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018; Spiel et al., 2019). Furthermore, Christoffer Larsson's study investigating idle game players found that players expressed "clear signs of a desire to maximize their efficiency and the production in the game" (Larsson, 2019, p. 28), with many participants interrupting their daily lives to ensure continued progress. Several of the interviewees interrupted their interviews to tend to the game and those who did not expressed irritation at "the lost opportunity to progress" (Larsson, 2019, p. 28), with the author arguing that this behavior signified that players had lost their feeling of autonomy and were compelled to return to the game frequently.

Monetization

Given the strong drive for progress and the fact that waiting constitutes such a core element of the idle game genre, it is a rather simple task for developers to incorporate microtransactions that profit off the impatience of players (Evans, 2016). The ease with which idle games lend themselves to exploitation has prompted developers of idle games to express a desire to be "Care-full in Design" (Spiel et al., 2019, p. 500), with many viewing microtransactions in idle games as being unethical.

This concern is substantiated by the fact that idle games exhibit an average revenue per daily active user (ARPDAU) that surpasses hyper-casual games, a subgenre of casual games categorized by simplistic user interfaces and easy-to-play designs, by a factor of nine, with approximately 37% of mobile idle games monetized primarily through in-app purchases (Bravo, 2019). These microtransactions are, in essence, "monetising player impatience" (Evans, 2016, p. 5), offering players the ability to bypass substantial portions of gameplay in exchange for real-world money. Some players perceive microtransactions as positive, allowing them to align gameplay with their schedules and providing a greater sense of control over the gaming experience, especially when their time may be limited (Carter et al., 2014; Evans, 2016), but there are also inherent risks with this form of progression.

Developers may intentionally prolong game progression to an excessive extent, not to enhance engagement or entertainment, but rather to incentivize players to spend money to circumvent tedious aspects of gameplay (Evans, 2016). This is also seen outside the idle game genre as one interviewed player reported that they quit playing *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) due to their perception that the leveling system was deliberately slowed down to promote the sale of experience point boosters exclusively available through the spending of real-world currency (Perdomo, 2021).

Another example of over-monetization is found in the idle simulation game *Virtual Villagers: Origin 2* (Last Day of Work, 2017). This game, like other instances of the series, puts the player in charge of a small group of villagers on a tropical island that they must manage, keep alive, and use to solve puzzles, but unlike other games in the series, this game featured microtransactions. Additionally, perhaps due to changing trends in the game industry, this game took several times longer to complete than earlier entries in the series despite having a comparable amount of content to its predecessors, compelling the player to spend money on microtransactions, a feature not found in earlier entries.

However, one of the game's most notable instances of microtransactions is a non-playable character (NPC) in the form of a lemur. This character, unlike many other instances of microtransactions in idle games, does not reduce the player's wait time. Instead, the lemur modifies the game's ludic efficiency: "the extent to which an interface device eases or hinders the player's attempt to perform any

given operation within the game" (Tanenbaum & Bizzochi, 2009, p. 128). In this instance, the lemur, when purchased for $9.99, would become a permanent addition to the island, repeatedly performing a task that would normally take the player considerable time and resources to complete every day. The lemur's worth is further accentuated by the game freely giving it to players during their first week of gameplay, only to later revoke it and demand payment if they wish to continue utilizing its services.

The manipulation of ludic efficiency is a prevalent practice within the idle game genre (Alharthi, Toups, et al., 2018) with one such instance being found in the game *Adventure Capitalist* (Hyper Hippo Entertainment, 2014). In this game, players begin by being put in charge of a small business, running a lemonade stand. They must click on the business every few seconds to generate in-game currency that may then be used to upgrade the lemonade stand or invest in another business that the player must also tap on at set intervals to generate in-game currency. Here players are afforded the opportunity to purchase managers who automate specific in-game businesses, freeing them from the need to repeatedly tap to produce in-game currency. However, it is important to note that these managers can only be obtained using non-premium in-game currency and are strategically designed to incentivize players to reach milestones. In contrast, the lemur in *Virtual Villagers: Origin 2* can only be obtained with real-world currency, rendering even premium currency earned slowly through daily logins and the completion of quests (Evans, 2016) ineffective as a substitute. The incorporation of the lemur serves to automate a task that was likely only integrated to entice players to purchase the lemur, and in doing so, further exemplifies how idle games can exploit the desires of their players to make continuous and steady progress.

Conclusion

The emergence of cozy games has provided players with a welcome respite from the fast-paced challenges of traditional gaming, offering a tranquil and soothing experience. Idle games share distinct similarities with cozy games in terms of their gameplay mechanics and the feelings they evoke in players. The core element of waiting in idle games aligns with the cozy genre's emphasis on safety, abundance, and softness, creating an environment that fosters a constant sense of progression and growth without the fear of failure or loss of progress.

However, while idle games may offer a cozy and comforting experience at first glance, their very nature encourages players to return frequently to optimize production. This is not intrinsically harmful as the authors of the paper "Focus Cat: Designing Idle Games to Promote Intermittent Practice and On-Going Adherence of Breathing Exercise for ADHD" (Sadprasid et al., 2022) strove to use

this nature to create an app that would keep their players performing breathing exercises consistently and at regular intervals.

Additionally, *The Longing* (Studio Seufz, 2019) is an instance of a cozy idle game that manages to merge the desire for efficiency often produced by idle games, with a feeling of calmness and tranquility often found within cozy games. This game, reminiscent of early point-and-click adventure games, begins with the player's character being ordered to wake up their king from his nap after 400 real-world days have passed. From there, the player is free to turn off the game and return over a year later to complete this task, but they may also use that time to explore the underground kingdom that their king rules over, gathering resources and discovering secrets as they wander. Additionally, this game may be considered cozy through all measures laid out by Short et al. (2018).

The player is filled with a sense of safety and abundance as there are no threats to overcome or requirements that must be met to continue playing or advancing. Additionally, softness is experienced through the game's relaxing ambient music and deliberately slow walking speed. However, the true cozy nature of this game is experienced when returning to the player's home. Initially, this is no more than an empty cave, but the player may use the resources that they have gathered throughout the kingdom to turn it into a proper home. Placing furniture, playing music, reading books, starting a fire within the fireplace, and creating personalized drawings that may be hung on the cave's wall are all actions available to the player, which not only customize the cave and make it feel more like a home but also accelerate the timer ticking down to the king's awakening. As such, it may be said that *The Longing* is a game that compels a sense of coziness within its players by feeding on their desire for efficiency, convincing them to build a home where they may experience a sense of calmness and tranquility.

However, while the idle game genre has the potential to produce a cozy experience, it is inherently compromised by the widespread integration of microtransactions. This monetization approach exploits player impatience (Larsson, 2019; Spiel et al., 2019), offering shortcuts in exchange for real-world money to bypass gameplay elements and accelerate progress. Such practices not only raise ethical concerns but also disrupt the tranquil and serene experience that defines cozy games. Consequently, continuous progression, a hallmark of the idle game genre, becomes overshadowed by the urge and temptation to spend money to avoid tedious wait times, thus undermining the genre's potential to offer a soothing and enjoyable experience. This shift towards profit-oriented design reflects a troubling trend in game development, where the intrinsic qualities of a genre are sacrificed for the sake of the developer's financial gain, detracting from the player's sense of achievement and satisfaction.

As such, while idle games can be considered part of the genre of cozy games due to their ability to evoke feelings of comfort and steady growth, the exploitation of player impatience through microtransactions both hinders player enjoyment and raises ethical questions about the game development industry's responsibility to prioritize the well-being of players over profit. This is an issue that must be addressed in order to foster an environment that upholds player enjoyment and satisfaction of its players, and in doing so, the game industry can become a haven for players seeking a serene and rewarding gaming experience.

Bibliography

Alharthi, S.A., Alsaedi, O., Toups, Z.O., Tanenbaum, T.J., & Hammer, J. (2018). Playing to Wait: A Taxonomy of Idle Games. In: *CHI '18: Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1–15). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3174195

Alharthi, S.A., Toups, Z.A., Alsaedi, O., Hammer, J., & Tanenbaum, T.J. (2018). *The Pleasure of Playing Less: A Study of Incremental Games Through the Lens of Kittens*. ETC Press.

Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. (2011). *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*. Harvard Business Press.

Bravo, I. (2019, November 28). Hyper-Casual vs Idle Games: The Latest Trends in Mobile Games. *GameAnalytics*. https://gameanalytics.com/blog/hyper-casual-vs-idle-games/ (accessed on March 3, 2024).

Buday, R., Baranowski, T., & Thompson, D. (2012). Fun and Games and Boredom. *GAMES FOR HEALTH: Research, Development, and Clinical Applications*, *1*(4), 257–261. https://doi.org/10.1089%2Fg4h.2012.0026

Carter, M., Nansen, B., & Gibbs, M.R. (2014). Screen Ecologies, Multi-Gaming and Designing for Different Registers of Engagement. In: *CHI PLAY '14: Proceedings of the First ACM SIGCHI Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play* (pp. 37–46). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/2658537.2658686

Cutting, J., Gundry, D., & Cairns, P. (2019). Busy Doing Nothing? What Do Players Do in Idle Games? *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, *122*, 133–144. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2018.09.006

Deci, E.L., Ryan, R.M., Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1985). Conceptualizations of Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination. In: E.. Deci & R.M. Ryan (Eds.), *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (pp. 11–40). Springer.

Demaine, E.D., Ito, H., Langerman, S., Lynch, J., Rudoy, M., & Xiao, K. (2020). Cookie Clicker. *Graphs and Combinatorics*, *36*, 269–302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00373-019-02093-4

Derrida, J. (1967). *Writing and Difference*. Éditions du Seuil.

Deterding, S. (2016). Progress Wars: Idle Games and the Demarcation of "Real" Games. In: *DiGRA/FDG '16 – Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. Digital Games Research Association and Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games.

Deterding, S. (2019). Cookie Clicker. In: M.T. Payne & N.B. Huntemann (Eds.), *How to Play Video Games* (pp. 200–207). New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479830404.003.0028

Evans, E. (2016). The Economics of Free: Freemium Games, Branding and the Impatience Economy. *Covergence*, *22*(6), 563–580. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856514567052

Fizek, S. (2018). Interpassivity and the Joy of Delegated Play in Idle Games. *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, *3*(3), 137–163.

Fizek, S. (2022). *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. MIT Press.

Howe, C. (2017, June 30). The Design of Time: Understanding Human Attention and Economies of Engagement. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIrfxZ4KbOA (accessed on March 3, 2024).

Keogh, B., & Richardson, I. (2018). Waiting to Play: The L abour o f B ackground Games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *21*(1), 13–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 1367549417705603

Larsson, C. (2019). *An Investigation of Compulsive Interactions and Mechanics in Incremental Idle Clickers* [Bachelor dissertation, Malmö University]. DiVA portal. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1481219&dswid=2727

Maslow, A. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*, 370–396.

Montola, M., Stenros, J., & Waern, A. (2009). *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*. CRC Press.

Perdomo, P. (2021). Grinding from a Player's and Game Designer's Point of View [Bachelor dissertation, Malmö University]. DiVA portal. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1564771&dswid=7781

Richmond, S.C. (2015). Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us about *Candy Crush*. *Journal of Visual Culture*, *14*(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914567143

Ruffino, P. (2021). The End of Capitalism: Disengaging from the Economic Imaginary of Incremental Games. *Games and Culture*, *16*(2), 208–227. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019886242

Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78. https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.55.1.68

Sadprasid, B., Tabor, A., Scheme, E., & Bateman, S. (2022). Focus Cat: Designing Idle Games to Promote Intermittent Practice and On-Going Adherence of Breathing Exercise for ADHD. In: K. Gerling, J. Iacovides, R. Malaka, B. Bonsignore, & J. Frommel (Eds.), *CHI PLAY '22: Extended Abstracts of the 2022 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play* (pp. 303–310). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3505270.3558381

Salen Tekinbas, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2003). *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press.

Short, T.X., Ordon, A., Hurd, D., Howe, C., Forbes, J., Eiserloh, S., Diaz, J., Cook, D., & Meiners, R. (2018, January 24). Cozy Games. *Lostgarden*. https://lostgarden.home.blog/2018/01/24/cozy-games/ (accessed on March 3, 2024).

Spiel, K., Alharthi, S.A., Cen, A.J.L., Hammer, J., Nacke, L.E., Toups, Z.O., & Tanenbaum, T.J. (2019). "It Started as a Joke": On the Design of Idle Games. In: *CHI PLAY '19: Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play* (pp. 495–508). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3311350.3347180

Tanenbaum, T.J., & Bizzocchi, J. (2009). Rock Band: A Case Study in the Design of Embodied Interface Experience. In: S.N. Spencer (Ed.), *Sandbox '09: Proceedings of the 2009 ACM SIGGRAPH Symposium on Video Games* (pp. 127–134). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/1581073.1581093

Yee, N. (2016). *The Surprising Profile of Idle Clicker Gamers*. Quantic Foundry.

Ludography

Bogost, I. (2010). *Crow Clicker*.

Fredricksen, E. (2002). *Progress Quest*. Eric Fredricksen, pkunk.

Hyper Hippo Productions. (2014). *Adventure Capitalist*. Hyper Hippo Productions, Kongregate Inc.

Last Day of Work. (2017). *Virtual Villagers: Origin 2*. Last Day of Work, Gogii Games.

Orteil. (2013). *Cookie Clicker*. DashNet, Playsaurus.

Studio Seufz. (2019). *The Longing*. Application Systems Heidelberg.

Ubisoft. (2018). *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Ubisoft.

Justin Buergi is a Ph.D. Candidate in Critical Game Design at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. His research is focused on the domain of idle games, with a particular emphasis on investigating the underlying motivations that prompt players to engage in regular and recurrent interactions with instances of this genre. Moreover, his research delves into the strategic methodologies employed by game developers to leverage these motivational factors in order to compel frequent interactions and spending on microtransactions.

Adam Mazurkiewicz* ⓘD

Gry farmerskie utrzymane w estetyce *cozy* jako fantazmat marzeń o prostym życiu

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest nurtowi gier farmerskich, które można opisać za pomocą estetyki *cozy*/„przytulności". Kreowane w nich życie na wsi oparte jest o zjawiska kulturowe (głównie kino slow cinema i idylliczne obrazy wywiedzione z piosenek popularnych). Tym, co charakteryzuje gry cozy, jest tworzenie wrażenia powolności i przedkładania relacji ponad rywalizację czy osiągnięcie zamierzonego celu. Z tego względu etapy „życia" na farmie, składające się na funkcjonowanie gracza w rozgrywce – sianie, oczekiwanie na zbiory, żniwa – urastają do celu samego w sobie, dzięki swej powtarzalności stanowiąc źródło satysfakcji. Wpisana w rutynę cykliczność koresponduje z właściwą dla czasu rytualnego odnową. Uczestniczenie w tym akcie użytkownika gry pozwala mu zarazem wejść w ów czas, aby wziąć udział w rytuale tworzącym sens naddany temu, co jednostajne. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja gier farmerskich jako realizacji w cyfrowej przestrzeni fantazmatu o „prostym życiu", będącym odpowiedzią na dynamicznie zmieniającą się pod wpływem technologii rzeczywistość społeczną. Marzenie to jest zarazem artystycznym przejawem szerszego projektu egzystencjalnego, jakim jest nurt *slow life*.

Słowa kluczowe: gry cozy, gry farmerskie, czas rytualny, jednostajność, Farmerama

*   Uniwersytet Łódzki, e-mail: adam.mazurkiewicz@uni.lodz.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3804-6445

Farming games in the cozy aesthetic a fantasy of dreams of a simple life

Abstract

The article is devoted to the trend of farm games, which can be described using the aesthetics of cozy / "coziness". The countryside life they create is based on cultural phenomena (mainly slow cinema and idyllic images derived from popular songs). What characterizes cozy games is creating the impression of slowness and putting relationships above competition or achieving the intended goal. For this reason, the stages of "life" on the farm, which make up the player's functioning in the game – sowing, waiting for the harvest, and harvest itself – become the goal in themselves, constituting a source of satisfaction thanks to their repetition. The cyclicality inherent in the routine corresponds to the renewal proper to ritual time. The participation in this act of the user of the game allows them to enter this time in order to take part in a ritual that gives additional meaning to what is monotonous. The aim of the article is to present farm games as a realization in the digital space of a phantasm about a "simple life," which is a response to the social reality dynamically changing due to the influence of technology. At the same time, this dream is an artistic manifestation of a broader existential project, which is the slow life trend.

Keywords: cozy games, farm games, ritual time, monotony, Farmerama.

Wprowadzenie

> *W każdym z nas drzemie tęsknota za wiejskim życiem w sercu natury z dala od codziennego stresu. W Wolnych Farmerach każdy może znaleźć spokój idyllicznej wsi. Tutaj gracze znajdą swoją wiejską oazę spokoju. (…) Jedno jest pewne: W Wolnych Farmerach nawet inwazja marsjan [sic!] nie jest w stanie zakłócić spokoju wiejskiego życia.*
>
> (Wolni Farmerzy, bd.)

„Wieś jak wieś. Trzykilometrowy rząd budynków rozsypuje się, pęka, potem scala na powrót w zwartą zabudowę. Beton, drewno, zapadnięte dachy, resztki płotów i żelazne balustrady tworzą zakalec biedy i tęsknoty za telewizyjnym światem" (Stasiuk, 2001, s. 12) – tak opisywał galicyjską prowincję Andrzej Stasiuk.

Ukazywana w przywołanym cytacie naznaczona rozpadem przestrzeń to dla pisarza zarazem – posłużmy się rozróżnieniem z *Przestrzeni i miejsca* (Tuan, 1977/1987) – miejsce trwania wartości, które w ponowoczesnej rzeczywistości odchodzą w zapomnienie bądź stają się anachroniczne w zderzeniu z „płynną nowoczesnością" (Bauman, 2000/2006), trwając zarazem w kulturowej pamięci (dzięki obecności na liście szkolnych lektur) wespół z apoteozą wsi zawartą renesansowej *Pieśni świętojańskiej o sobótce* (1579) Jana Kochanowskiego. Wpisany w nią projekt spokojnego życia wywiedziony jest z antycznej koncepcji homo bucolicus, identyfikowanej przez starożytnych twórców z człowiekiem arkadyjskim (resp. człowiekiem szczęśliwym). Stojący u podstaw takiego, negatywnego, postrzegania cywilizacji mit arkadyjski konstytuował literaturę bukoliczną, będącą wyrazem ludzkiego pragnienia spokoju (Śnieżko, 1997).

Nie należy przy tym zapominać, że w pierwotnym kontekście Arkadia jako przestrzeń spokoju nie tylko sytuowana była w przeszłości, ale też – w myśl moralistycznej i cyklicznej wykładni dziejów – miała nadejść w przyszłości. Zgodnie z logiką właśnie owej rzeczywistości podporządkowanej regule zmiany możliwe staje się ocalenie niegdysiejszych wartości, regulujących życie – tak w wymiarze jednostkowym, jak i społecznym. Możliwość ta pojawiła się wraz z redefinicją (tożsamą z reakcją na przygodność i fragmentaryczność postmodernistycznego *modus vivendi*) społeczeństwa ze struktury zorganizowanej na poziomie „makro-" na społeczności funkcjonujące w skali „mikro-" jako subświaty. Są one lokowane przez Krzysztofa Olechnickiego w Internecie, traktowanym przez badacza nie tyle jako medium treści, co „rozszerzenie" rzeczywistości społecznej (Szlendak, Olechnicki, 2017). Wirtualny charakter pozwala przy tym na uobecnienie odrębności aksjonormatywnej w ramach autonomicznego uniwersum poznawczego, umożliwiającego odseparowanie się danej społeczności od innych „enklaw", bądź społeczeństwa.

Znaczącą pod tym względem pozycję – ze względu na potencjał sensotwórczy, ale i ekonomiczny – zajmują gry, w których znana użytkownikowi z pozafikcyjnej rzeczywistości rywalizacja zastępowana zostaje współpracą, zaś konieczność zachowania czujności – poczuciem bezpieczeństwa, wynikającym ze specyfiki świata stanowionego. Można je zarazem traktować jako artystyczny wyraz (niekiedy niezwerbalizowanej) emocjonalnej potrzeby stabilności i bezpieczeństwa (Waszkiewicz, Bakun, 2020, s. 228). Przywołane tu atrybuty rozgrywki są charakterystyczne dla nurtu *cozy games* / gier przytulnych. Oparte na współpracy i kulturze wymiany, wykorzystują one mechanizmy przeglądarkowych gier społecznościowych. W grach tych – parafrazując słowa Marshalla McLuhana – sposób obrazowania staje się przekazem. Więcej niż o wizji rzeczywistości „wpisanej" w obraz mówi o potrzebach odbiorcy, ale też nadawcy komunikatu i tym, w jaki sposób postrzegają oni świat – zarówno w wymiarze fikcji, jak i pozaartystycznym

(np. *cottagecore,* tj. styl wnętrzarski wzorowany na wiejskim; Charzyński, 2022). Zgodnie z rozpoznaniem Sonji K. Foss takie dekodowanie postrzegania świata umożliwia krytyka retoryczna. Jedną z jej istotniejszych pod tym względem funkcji zdaje się odpowiedź na pytanie o sposób, w jaki postrzegają (ale i wartościują) świat zarówno nadawcy, jak i odbiorcy wypowiedzi (Foss, 1989, s. 193).

Sięgnięcie po perspektywę oferowaną przez krytykę retoryczną wydaje się tym istotniejsze, że obecnie gry są nie tylko zjawiskiem *stricte* ludycznym, ale też wypowiedzią w dyskursie poświęconym rzeczywistości społecznej, w której funkcjonują ich użytkownicy, ich fantazmatom i resentymentom. W tym sensie gry zaczynają spełniać funkcje analogiczne do opisanego niegdyś przez Cliforda Geertza zjawiska „gatunków zmąconych" (zob. Geertz, 1980/1990). Jednocześnie trudno odmówić grom ich pierwszej funkcji, tj. rozrywki. Można zatem gry, których fabuła sytuowana jest w rustykalnej scenerii, traktować jako artystyczną reakcję na społeczną potrzebę mentalnego „zakorzenienia".

Sygnalizowane tu cechy odnajdujemy przede wszystkim w grach określanych mianem farmerskich. Dzieje się tak dlatego, że wieś, zgodnie z funkcjonującym w *imaginarium communis* stereotypem, jest rezerwuarem tradycji. Toteż może być traktowana jako miejsce oferujące (cóż, że w postaci cyfrowej namiastki?) możliwość zaspokojenia potrzeby swojskości. Ów bukoliczno-sentymentalny obraz wsi w przestrzeni kultury uobecniany jest w postaci estetyki *cozy,* po którą sięgają twórcy gier farmerskich. Tym też zapewne (prócz nostalgii) należy tłumaczyć nieustającą popularność niegdysiejszych przebojów – w tym piosenki Urszuli Sipińskiej, która niegdyś zadawała pytania:

Czy jest jeszcze gdzieś
Prawdziwa ta wieś,
Spokojna, wesoła wieś
(Sipińska, 1981).

„Przytulne" gry farmerskie jako nurt osobny

Gdyby chcieć na te pytania odpowiedzieć, można byłoby uczynić to następująco: „Tak, jest jeszcze wieś: w cyfrowych grach farmerskich – przede wszystkim utrzymanych w estetyce *cozy*". Gry te – zgodnie z nazwą nurtu – tematyzują życie na wsi jako osobny (wobec miejskiego *modus vivendi*) zespół zachowań społecznych ujawniający się w preferowanych postawach i reakcjach.

Oczywiście nie wszystkie gry, których fabuła rozgrywa się w scenerii wiejskiej, należą do tego nurtu; są takie, które intencjonalnie „dekonstruują" wyobrażenia

na temat sielskiego charakteru wsi**1**. Tym, co wyróżnia nurt *cozy,* jest akcentowanie przez twórców gier związku człowieka i natury przy jednoczesnym odwołaniu się do pozytywnych emocji użytkownika. Punktem odniesienia pozostaje w tym przypadku koncepcja „ekologii głębokiej" Arnego Naessa wraz z „sakralizacją" relacji między człowiekiem i otaczającą go przyrodą (zob. Kozioł, 1998).

„Gry przytulne": mapowanie zjawiska

Niezależnie od różnic wynikających z wymogów, jakie stawiane są przed użytkownikami poszczególnych gier, można odnaleźć wspólne cechy tych produkcji, decydujące zarazem o możliwości wpisania ich w poetykę „gier przytulnych". Są to:

- Brak rywalizacji z innymi graczami jako warunku koniecznego dla podtrzymania rozgrywki. Alternatywą dla konkurencji staje się wówczas współpraca nad osiągnięciem celu zamierzonego czy wyznaczonego przez moderatorów gry. Niemałą rolę odgrywają też potencjalnie pod tym względem game designerzy, odpowiedzialni w procesie projektowania gry za równowagę między efektem artystycznym a funkcjonalnością.

- Możliwość selektywnego uczestniczenia w „eventach" organizowanych przez moderatorów gry i/lub projektantów. Udział w nich przynosi wprawdzie wymierne – w ramach świata gry – korzyści materialne, jednak użytkownik odnajduje się w grze również bez owych profitów. Stanowią one „zysk naddany", niekonieczny do odczuwania przez gracza satysfakcji z samego udziału w rozgrywce. Są pomocne w prowadzeniu gry, jednak najczęściej można je uzyskać po wydarzeniu bądź otrzymać w ramach wymiany lub handlu między graczami. Priorytetem staje się wówczas komfort psychiczny gracza, który nie czuje się przymuszony do rywalizacji; w zamian jego aktywność może być skierowana na tworzenie przestrzeni, w której czuje się dobrze

---

1 Parodystyczny wymiar osiągany jest przede wszystkim dzięki mechanice gry i sposobom obrazowania świata przedstawionego rozgrywki: postaci – nakreślone w estetyce „brulionowej" – są celowo projektowane jako brzydkie, bądź zdeformowane w sposób, który kojarzy się z filmami kreskówkowymi. Przykładem służy seria gier planszowych *Wiochmen* Marka Mydla i Piotra Stankiewicza (2005, 2007, 2011). Do grupy rolniczych gier *cozy* nie zaliczają się również te, w których – niczym w *Pure Farming* (Ice Flames, 2018) czy *Farm Manager* (Cleversan Software, 2021) – rywalizacja jest wpisana w logikę gry (zob. Jagusiak, 2023). Osobno należy potraktować sieciową grę *Farmers Stealing Tanks* (2022) autorstwa ThrustVector9 [właśc. ?]. Jej prosta fabuła inspirowana jest nagłośnionym medialnie epizodem związanym z agresją Federacji Rosyjskiej na Ukrainę, tj. kradzieżą rosyjskiego czołgu przez romskich rolników (zob. Wronowska, 2023). Aktualność wydarzeń podkreślają helikoptery, które mają utrudniać graczowi zadanie, i oprawa muzyczna, wykorzystująca motywy ludowych tańców ukraińskich: pełżanego i hopaka. Grę tę można uznać za element wojny cyfrowej między stronami bezpośrednio zaangażowanymi w konflikt.

– znacząca pod tym względem jest propozycja moderatorów gry *KapiFarm* (Upjers, 2013–): „Przytulny domek. Urządź ze swojego domu farmerskiego przytulny domek, a za wyposażenie swojego domu otrzymasz więcej klientów dziennie!"**2**.

- Akcentowanie kultury daru poprzez stworzenie takiej mechaniki gry, w której zachowania te będą promowane. Przykładem służy zarówno niezależna gra Erica Barone'a *Stardew Valley* (2016), jak i seria *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo i in., 2001–2020). Oba tytuły łączy akcentowanie roli relacji między graczami/awatarami. Davis Baird upatruje w akcie dawania sposób na budowanie relacji międzyludzkich prowadzących do pogłębienia w jednostkach poczucia przynależności do grupy (Baird, 1997, s. 127–139). Ugruntowywana w ten sposób spoistość grupy pozwala każdemu z jej członków zwiększyć poczucie bezpieczeństwa. Istotny jest przy tym – podkreślany przez Romana Bromboszcza – związek daru z wartościami etycznymi i aspektami prawnymi; w tym przypadku regulaminem rozgrywki, uwzględniającym ogólne warunki handlowe obowiązujące w danej grze (Bromboszcz, 2018, s. 156).

- Sprzyjanie nawiązywaniu więzi społecznych poprzez tworzenie forów tematycznych i zrzeszających – na zasadzie dobrowolnej przynależności – subspołeczności, dla których kryterium powstania są zainteresowania bądź wiek graczy. Relacje te – niekonieczne z perspektywy rozgrywki – stają się niekiedy jedną z motywacji do uczestnictwa w grze. Równie istotne co tworzenie więzi między graczami jest nawiązywanie empatycznej relacji z postaciami, z którymi gracz identyfikuje się w trakcie rozgrywki. Nie bez znaczenia jest przy tym czas, który użytkownik poświęca grze; zdaniem autorów jednego z opracowań dotyczących zagadnienia identyfikacji gracza z postacią zachodzi relacja pomiędzy poświęconym czasem a siłą identyfikacji (Lewis, Weber, Bowman, 2008, s. 517). Zaproponowany tu proces „rozpoznania" siebie w bohaterze gry można uzupełnić o aspekt projekcji, wyrażający się przeniesieniem własnej osobowości na fantomatyczną postać, której działaniami kierujemy w trakcie rozgrywki.

W obu przypadkach – tj. zarówno wówczas, gdy więzi tworzone są z człowiekiem, jak i gdy tworzymy relację z cyfrowym awatarem – zauważalne staje się przeniesienie aktywności użytkownika z samej rozgrywki na podtrzymanie nawiązanych dzięki niej kontaktów. Kluczem interpretacyjnym dla sygnalizowanej tu tendencji mogą być uwagi Johna Vanderhoefa na temat przemian nurtu *casual games* pod wpływem uczestnictwa w nich kobiet. Jako użytkowniczki gier były one nastawione na tworzenie relacji wypierającej element rywalizacji, charakteryzujący produkty adresowane do mężczyzn (Vanderhoef, 2021).

---

2   http://pl.kapifarm.com/gry-online-na-przegladarke/ (data dostępu: 27.04.2023).

Pożytki z przytulności: kilka supozycji i (nie)oczywistości

Zgodnie z zaprezentowaną uprzednio quasi-definicją gier farmerskich określamy operacyjnie w ten sposób cyfrowe programy rozrywkowe, w których fabuła osadzona zostaje w scenerii rustykalnej, kształtowanej zgodnie z kulturowym wyobrażeniem na temat bukolicznego charakteru wsi (to z kolei odwołuje się do utrwalonych stereotypów na temat wiejskiego *modus vivendi*). Można też na sygnalizowaną tu kwestię spojrzeć z perspektywy zaproponowanej przez Geralda Farcę, traktującego gry farmerskie jako cyfrowe uobecnienie myśli utopijnej (Farca, 2023).

Wzmiankowane tu gry są odpowiedzią na rosnące zapotrzebowanie konsumenckie różnych wiekowo grup odbiorczych i społecznych; twórcy jednej z gier, *Wolnych Farmerów* (Upjers, 2009–), deklarują: „Nie tylko fantasy i science fiction przyciągają graczy. Tęsknota za naturą i spokojnym życiem sprawia że Wolni Farmerzy jest jedną z bardziej lubianych gier" (Wolni Farmerzy, bd.). Przywołana tu – wyrażona eksplicytnie – wizja potrzeb użytkowników gier farmerskich pozwala na sformułowanie kilku następujących wniosków, uporządkowujących zebrane obserwacje:

- Gry rolnicze to typ gier, w których założenia estetyki przytulności wykorzystywane zostają w sposób szczególnie wyrazisty ze względu na towarzyszący im kontekst ideologiczno-społeczny. Są one przejawem szerszego zjawiska: mody na ekologizację zachowań konsumpcyjnych (zob. Dziewanowska, Kacprzak, 2013, s. 39). Odczytywane w zaproponowany tu sposób, gry te stają się cyfrową konceptualizacją problemów związanych z rozwojem, dominującego współcześnie na Zachodzie, paradygmatu cyberkulturowego, będącego wyrazem ekspansywnego rozwoju technologii cyfrowych (Borkowski, 2001). Z tego względu można traktować je jako świadectwo technologicznych uwikłań ponowoczesności rozdartej między nostalgią i dyktaturą postępu. Jako punkt odniesienia dla sygnalizowanej tu tendencji można potraktować koncepcję retrotopii Zygmunta Baumana (2018). Uwikłanie w przeszłość staje się wówczas świadectwem bezradności jednostki wobec przyszłości, której nie sposób już kontrolować. Odpowiedzią na ten *status quo* jest poszukiwanie modelu egzystencjalnego pozwalającego na pogodzenie wymogów dynamicznie technicyzującej się codzienności i nostalgicznego spojrzenia na kulturową przeszłość, tożsamą z rustykalnym stylem życia. Idea *slow life* staje się tym samym legitymizacją różnych form rekreacji mieszkańców miast (zob. Drożdż-Szczybura, 2016, s. 85–93). Pośród tych form istotne miejsce zajmują gry rolnicze jako teksty kultury pozwalające na unieważnienie w kreacji rzeczywistości stanowionej wymogów stawianych przed uczestnikami życia *offline*.

- Zapośredniczenie cyfrowe gier ukazujących wiejski *modus vivendi* nie stanowi warunku koniecznego dla sięgnięcia po estetykę *cozy*. Jednakże to właśnie cyfrowość – czy też raczej sieciowość – w znacznej mierze przyczynia się do odczuwania danej gry jako przytulnej z uwagi na możliwość tworzenia i podtrzymywania relacji społecznych. Dzięki nim z kolei poszczególni gracze czują się zaakceptowani mimo dzielących ich różnic – dominuje w tym przypadku zasada społecznej wymiany pozytywnych postaw.
- Gry „przytulne", dzięki nastawieniu na „pozytywne" relacje społeczne (przyjaźń, empatię, „zgranie się" jednostek w kolektyw), służą specyficznemu sposobowi spędzania czasu, definiowanemu w migotliwy znaczeniowo sposób. Epitet „miły", wykorzystywany do opisu jednej z nich (lapisik, 2023) odczytywać – zgodnie z notacją w *Słowniku języka polskiego* – jako „sprawiający przyjemne wrażenie, przyjemność, ujmujący, sympatyczny" czy też „drogi, kochany, godny miłości" (Doroszewski, 1963, s. 708). Gry farmerskie są zatem nie tylko – zgodnie z estetyką *cozy* – „przytulne" / nastrojowe (w sensie pozytywnym; zob. Dąbrowski, 2014, s. 134); definicja opatrzona drugim z kwalifikatorów zwraca uwagę na zaangażowanie emocjonalne. Dwoistość rozumienia pojęcia „miły", będącego kluczowym dla nurtu gier *cozy*, przekłada się na ich estetykę. Wzorowana ona zostaje na filmach animowanych, adresowanych do młodego odbiorcy, w których „łagodność" krajobrazu jest wyrażana nie tylko poprzez dobór kolorów. Równie istotne pod tym względem są zaokrąglone kontury obiektów współtworzących świat stanowiony. Interesująco owe zatarcie ostrych konturów wykorzystane zostało w tworzeniu pól. Są one – ze względu na wymogi programu komputerowego – w kształcie prostokątów o bokach i kątach „złagodzonych"; w tej funkcji w *Farmeramie* (2009–) i *Ale Folwark* (Ten Square Games, 2014–) pojawiają się rabatki. Z kolei w *Big Farm* (Goodgame Studios, Altigi GmBH, 2012) rośliny przesłaniają sobą granice pól, dzięki czemu ich siatka, przy zachowaniu ergonomii, nie razi w przywołanych tu grach nadmierną geometryzacją. Atmosferę rozgrywki współtworzą przy tym warunki atmosferyczne i pora doby (dominuje słoneczny dzień[3]) oraz dźwięki. Składają się na nie – kojarzone ze wsią – odgłosy zwierząt hodowlanych, którym towarzyszy stonowany podkład muzyczny, pozwalający na emocjonalną relaksację słuchającego.

---

[3] Wyjątkiem pod tym względem jest sceneria misji specjalnych w grze *Farmerama* (2009–). Ponieważ utrzymane są one w „uładzonej" wersji gotycyzmu, mamy tu do czynienia z księżycową nocą. Poświata lunarna jest na tyle silna, że gracz potrafi rozpoznać charakterystyczne elementy pejzażu (zrujnowany zamek, bezlistne drzewo). Elementy ozdobne utrzymane są w tonacji humorystycznej: wampiry – przypominające koty w pelerynach z filmu *Dracula – wampiry bez zębów* (Brooks, 1995) – mieszkają w wampirzych domkach z cukierków lub czekolady (zależnie od stopnia ulepszenia siedziby).

- Równie istotne, co semantyczne uwikłania pojęcia „miły", jest wykorzystanie w grach farmerskich stereotypów funkcjonujących w *imaginarium communis*. Wyrażają się one w kontaminacji społecznych wyobrażeń na temat „życia na wsi" oraz popkulturowej asymilacji idei rustykalnych. Gra bazująca na sukcesywnym powiększaniu zasobów i możliwości hodowli może wydawać się – zwłaszcza przyzwyczajonym do innego typu rozgrywek – monotonna. Regularność czynności, opcjonalnie przerywana uczestnictwem w kolejnych eventach, jest jednakże w przywoływanych tu grach źródłem szczególnej przyjemności, którą można byłoby – odwołując się do typizacji gier przez Rogera Calloisa – określić mianem *ilinx à rebours*. Wspólną właściwością obu zjawisk, tj. wyodrębnionego przez badacza typu zabaw i gier farmerskich, jest dążenie do zatracenia przez rzeczywistość jej praw (Callois, 1961/1997, s. 30). W *ilinx* staje się to możliwe dzięki utracie stabilności recepcji; w grach rolniczych analogiczną funkcję spełnia wzmiankowana wyżej powtarzalność. Dla takiej strategii – eksponującej „nudę" codzienności – punktem odniesienia pozostaje zjawisko *slow cinema*. Jest to nurt w kinematografii, którego twórcy „odzyskują" egzotykę codzienności i teraźniejszości; można zatem przeciwstawić go założeniom kina akcentującego dynamikę akcji i atrakcyjność wizualną opowieści. W konfrontacji z nim minimalizm *slow cinema* pozwala zatrzymać się na detalu, dzięki czemu osiągany zostaje efekt kontemplacyjny, zagubiony zwłaszcza w filmach z nurtu „kina gatunków" (szczególnie w kinie sensacyjnym). Jednocześnie twórcy tego nurtu kina traktują zabiegi formalne jako sposób odnowy percepcji (Stańczyk, 2019, s. 27). Nie należy oczywiście postrzegać gier *cozy* jako cyfrowej wersji tego zjawiska. W przeciwieństwie do gier „przytulnych" twórcy nurtu *slow cinema* nie wahają się sięgać po tematy społecznie trudne, wzbudzające w odbiorcy dyskomfort (przede wszystkim kino to porusza kwestie społecznego wykluczenia). Niemniej twórcy gier *cozy* korzystają z technik wypracowanych przez nurt *slow cinema*.

Sygnalizowana uprzednio „nuda" staje się nie tylko kluczem interpretacyjnym, ale i wartością samoistną, pozwalającą „odzyskać" czas. To bowiem, co moglibyśmy uznać za krytykę codzienności, będącej jedyną przestrzenią aktywności życiowej bohaterów, okazuje się konceptualizacją (po)nowoczesnego doświadczenia egzystencjalnego (Czapliński, 1999, s. 245). Tym samym negatywnie wartościowana w *imaginarium communis* apatia, prowadząca do bezrefleksyjności, w grach rolniczych staje się źródłem satysfakcji płynącej z możliwości pędzenia pozornie ubogiej – w porównaniu z doświadczeniem życiowym gracza – we wrażenia egzystencji, w której powtarzalność oferuje poczucie bezpieczeństwa i gwarancję spokoju. O randze pozytywnie odbieranego bezwładu świadczy fakt, że oferuje go zdecydowana większość gier należących do omawianego tu nurtu. Na tym tle

osobnymi propozycjami pozostają *Fae Farm* (Phoenix Labs, 2023) oraz *Disney Dreamlight Valley* (Gameloft Montreal, 2023) – tu prowadzenie farmy wzbogacone jest o możliwość eksploracji świata i jego tajemnic.

Przewartościowanie kategorii „nudy" jest możliwe dzięki dokonywanej przez użytkownika konfrontacji rzeczywistości gry i pozaartystycznej; na nieoczywistość wartościowania marazmu w grach farmerskich zwraca uwagę Alenda Y. Chang, wskazując na współistnienie w nich pierwiastka produkcyjności i bezczynności jako współtworzących wyobrażenie na temat wiejskiego życia (Chang, 2012, s. 241). Można też odczytywać dobrowolną apatię gracza jako świadectwo sprzeciwu wobec wyzwań nowoczesności, a pośrednio także krytykę kapitalizmu. Rezygnacja z aktywizmu jako postawy wobec świata wykreowanego na potrzeby rozgrywki przyjmuje różne formy: w *Farmeramie* może wyrażać się rezygnacją z eventów oferowanych graczom przez moderatorów, zaś w *Royal Story* (Plinga, 2014) z kolei koncentracją na wyglądzie bohaterki i jej farmy przy niespiesznym wykonywaniu proponowanych zadań rozszerzających granice świata przedstawionego. Z kolei bohater *Stardew Valley* może, choć nie musi, podejmować relację z siecią JojaMart, należącą do „Joja Corporation".

Tym samym możliwe staje się (przynajmniej w fantomatycznym świecie rozgrywki) uczynienie codzienności wyrazem pełni egzystencji zamiast traktowania jej jako – posłużmy się sformułowaniem Joanny Brach-Czajny – „tła egzystencjalnego" (Brach-Czajna, 1992, s. 55)**4**.

- Etapy „życia" na farmie, składające się na funkcjonowanie gracza w rozgrywce – sianie, oczekiwanie na zbiory, żniwa – urastają do celu samego w sobie dzięki swej powtarzalności. W przywoływanych uprzednio grach, zwłaszcza tych o charakterze *single player* (np. *Royal Story* czy seria zapoczątkowana grą *Harvest Moon* [Wada, Hashimoto, 1996) oraz społecznościowych, których użytkownik zdecyduje się ograniczyć do minimum kontakty z innymi graczami (taka możliwość istnieje m.in. w *Farmeramie*), cykliczność aktywności pozwala uczestnikowi rozgrywki na „zanurzenie się" w bezczas pozwalający na zdystansowanie się wobec własnego doświadczenia życiowego – tym bardziej, że dominujący współcześnie (przynajmniej na Zachodzie) model postprzemysłowego społeczeństwa ryzyka niesie z sobą istotne dla

---

4 Istnieje przy tym zasadnicza różnica w odczytaniu konsekwencji definiującej codzienność powtarzalności przez badaczkę i twórców gier farmerskich. Ta pierwsza akcentuje przede wszystkim zagrożenia wynikające z cykliczności (a zatem i mechanizacji) czynności, pozbawionych najczęściej głębszego znaczenia: „Szczególnie narażone na podskórne działanie codzienności są uczucia. Codzienność potrafi zdziesiątkować je bezgłośnie" (Brach-Czajna, 1992, s. 62). Tymczasem dla twórców utrzymanych w poetyce *cozy* gier rolniczych celem jest właśnie owo „zdziesiątkowanie" uczuć i emocji, aby możliwe stało się (od)-zyskanie poczucia bezpieczeństwa.

jednostki obciążenia psychologiczne, którym towarzyszy brak stabilizacji (zob. Chryniewicz, 2014). Gry farmerskie *cozy* stanowią tym samym *remedium* na odczuwane przez użytkownika napięcie egzystencjalne. Widoczne jest to zwłaszcza w tych grach, w których – niczym w *Stardew Valley* bądź *Coral Island* (Coral Games, 2023) – w przedakcji poznajemy historię życia bohatera. W pierwszej z przywołanych tu gier jest on uwikłany w korporacyjne rozgrywki, rezygnuje z życia w wielkim mieście za sprawą otrzymanego spadku i przenosi się na wieś. Dopiero tutaj może realizować się zawodowo jako farmer, ale też odzyskuje sens życia, zagubiony w jego poprzedniej pracy. Z kolei bohater *Coral Island* przenosi się z fikcyjnego miasta Pokyo na tytułową wysepkę, na której buduje własną farmę[5].

Jednostajność nie „dehumanizuje" zatem, lecz stanowi źródło satysfakcji. Co więcej: zakładana przez rutynę cykliczność może przy tym korespondować z właściwą dla czasu rytualnego odnową (Eliade, 1970, s. 97–100)[6]. Uczestniczenie w tym akcie użytkownika gry pozwala mu zarazem wejść w czas „sakralny", a tym samym naddać sens jednostajności. Postępowanie takie ułatwia wykorzystanie scenerii wiejskiej identyfikowanej w wyobraźni zbiorowej z przestrzenią natury. Kolejne czynności gracza wynikają z harmonijnego współistnienia z naturą, co podkreśla relacja pomiędzy mechaniką gry a cyklicznością pór roku. Tak odczytywana cykliczność staje się powrotem *sacrum* w zdesakralizowanej postaci.

Podsumowanie

Omawiając modernizację rodzimej wsi, Stanisław Moskal podkreślał jej ewolucję wymuszoną realiami cywilizacyjno-kulturowymi (Moskal, 2005, s. 42). Owa zmiana dotyczy również obrazów wsi zawartych w artystycznych przekazach (Sulima, 2014, s. 57–63). Stanowi przy tym przeciwwagę dla obarczonego *odium*, społecznie i kulturowo stygmatyzującego postrzegania wsi jako dłużnika społeczeństwa i balastu przemian po roku 1989 (Bukraba-Rylska, 2010, s. 56–72). Reakcją na ten dysonans poznawczy stał się fantazmat wsi jako miejsca nacechowanego sielskością. Twórcy gier nie kryją się przy tym z umownym charakterem rozgrywki – w opisie *Wolnych Farmerów* czytamy: „Opieka nad farmą to wcale nie jest prosta sprawa.

---

[5]   Wykorzystany przez twórców gry onim nieprzypadkowo nawiązuje do Tokio – jednej z największych i najgęściej zaludnionych metropolii świata. Decyzja bohatera, aby zmienić miejsce zamieszkania na małą wysepkę, jest zatem – w kontekście charakteru poprzedniego miejsca zamieszkania – ideologicznie znacząca.

[6]   Z perspektywy cykliczności czasu znaczenia nabierają eventy okolicznościowe, związane ze świętami. Są one zazwyczaj ustalane w rytmie rocznym, korespondującym z wydarzeniami w świecie pozafikcyjnym (Boże Narodzenie, Nowy Rok, Wielkanoc, rozpoczęcie wakacji, Halloween).

Zawód rolnika wymaga wielu poświęceń. Jednak istnieje alternatywny sposób na ich eliminację, a mianowicie gra farmerska" (Grynaprzegladarke.net, bd.). Tym samym uobecniające rustykalizm gry *cozy* stają się przejawem szerszego zjawiska, jakim pozostaje we współczesnej kulturze model *slow life*.

Dodatek: gra sieciowa Farmerama (2009-) – studium przypadku

Za przykład utrzymanej w estetyce *cozy* gry, którą można uznać za kwintesencję tego zjawiska, służy *Farmerama* (2009–), uhonorowana m.in. nagrodą Deutscher Entwicklerpreis (Essen 2010), wyróżnieniem w kategorii „Społeczna gra sieciowa" / *Social Network Game* w trakcie wydarzenia British Academy Games Awards (2011) organizowanego przez British Academy of Film and Television Arts, a także nagrodą Mashable Awards (dawniej Open Web Awards) na konferencji International CES 2011 (Las Vegas, Nevada). Tytuł ten jest też przywoływany w refleksji nad możliwościami wykorzystania gier w dydaktyce (Gabriel, 2019, s. 9–30).

Tym, co decyduje o przynależności *Farmeramy* do nurtu gier „przytulnych", jest przede wszystkim kreacja świata przedstawionego: to rzeczywistość wypełniona pastelowymi barwami, w której „kanciastość" kształtów zostaje złagodzona zaokrągleniami. Równie istotni dla odczucia charakteru *cozy* gry pozostają bohaterowie ukazywani w paratekstach (*trailerze,* czołówce gry, ekranach minigier i eventów): są oni zwierzętami ukazanymi w sposób antropomorficzny, zaś ich oblicza wzorowane są na estetyce filmów Walta Disneya. Dzięki takiej strategii możliwe stało się wprowadzenie Krainy Pełni Księżyca, zamieszkałej przez istoty o demonicznej prowenienicji.

Ponieważ gra funkcjonuje w środowisku internetowym, w towarzyszących jej paratekstach szczególnie wyeksponowane zostają walory aktywności społecznej, wpisanej w mechanizmy rozgrywki: „Jako że *Farmerama* kładzie nacisk na aspekt społecznościowy, w toku zabawy będziemy handlować swoim dobytkiem z innymi graczami. Możemy im również wysyłać specjalne wiadomości, a także prezenty w formie przedmiotów do wykorzystania w dalszej części zabawy" (Dobreprogramy.pl, bd.).

W przywołanym tu cytacie zwraca uwagę utożsamienie omawianej gry z zabawą; ta zaś, jakkolwiek ograniczona odgórnie narzuconymi zasadami, przede wszystkim służy rozrywce. Nie bez znaczenia przy tym jest fakt, że w *Farmeramie* nie ma narzuconych zadań, których realizacja byłaby konieczna do kontynowania rozgrywki. Owszem: w Spółdzielni są dostępne „misje" (ich liczba zwiększa się wraz z rozwojem farmy), ale już kolejność ich realizacji pozostaje dowolna; można też zrezygnować z ich realizacji, podobnie jak z dostarczania towarów w Kąciku Zleceń. Podobnie nie jest obowiązkowe wystawianie zbieranych plonów, robienie zakupów na Targu ani nawet korzystanie z Farmerskiego Koła Fortuny, umożli-

wiającego zdobycie przedmiotów ułatwiających rozgrywkę. Podkreślony zostaje w ten sposób ludyczny, a jednocześnie dobrowolny, charakter podejmowanych czynności, przy czym są one pozbawione rywalizacji jako elementu konstytuującego rozgrywkę. Można by zatem traktować *Farmeramę* jako przykład gry, w której interakcje interesowne i nieinteresowne (sformułowanie Michała Wróblewskiego, 2009, s. 290) stają się równie ważne dla uczestnika rozgrywki. Wynika to z faktu, że składają się one na odgrywanie przez użytkownika roli właściciela farmy.

Co istotne: lektura wpisów na dołączonym do gry forum, na którym mogą wypowiadać się użytkownicy, uświadamia, że interakcje nieinteresowne przeważają nad tymi, które potencjalnie przynoszą rozmówcom korzyści w świecie gry. Wyraża się to w podejmowanych tematach, dalece wykraczających poza zagadnienia związane z grą, jak i tworzeniu profilowanych (ze względu na wiek, płeć czy zainteresowania) grup. Innymi słowy: efektywność kontaktu z innymi graczami nie musi stanowić priorytetu w decyzji o podejmowaniu interakcji – ta bowiem może być celem samym w sobie, realizowanym poprzez uczestnictwo w rozmowie na forum bądź czacie gry. Tym samym akcenty zabawy intencjonalnie dekonstruują reguły pierwotne wobec decyzji grającego (Wróblewski 2009, s. 289–292). Co więcej: możliwe jest potraktowanie *Farmeramy* nie jako gry sieciowej, a typu *single player*, co pozwala na ograniczenie interakcji z pozostałymi graczami (aż do rezygnacji z kontaktów bądź ograniczenia się do transakcji *stricte* handlowych w ramach Targu).

Wielość potencjalnych strategii wykorzystywanych w trakcie grania sprawia, że *Farmerama* może stać się dla użytkownika laboratorium społecznym, umożliwiającym testowanie w komfortowych warunkach relacji socjologicznych różnego typu. Zbliża się w tej roli do gier symulacyjnych, zaś wykorzystywana na potrzeby rozgrywki estetyka „przytulności" zwiększa wygodę psychiczną gracza, nie odczuwającego presji na uczestnictwo w rywalizacji w stopniu większym, niż byłby skłonny zaakceptować.

Bibliografia

Baird, D. (1997). Scientific Instrumental Making, Epistemology, and Conflict between Gift and Commodity Economies. *Society for Philosophy Qaurterly Electronic Journal*, *2*(3–4), 127–139.

Bauman, Z. (2006). *Płynna nowoczesność* (tłum. T. Kunz). Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Bauman, Z. (2018). *Retrotopia. Jak rządzi nami przeszłość* (tłum. K. Lebek). Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Borkowski, R. (2001). *Cywilizacja. Technika. Ekologia. Wybrane problemy rozwoju cywilizacyjnego u progu XXI wieku*. AGH Uczelniane Wydawnictwa Naukowo-Dydaktyczne.

Brach-Czajna, J. (1992). *Szczeliny istnienia*. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

Bromboszcz, R. (2018). Wspólnota transferu a obyczaj daru. Dobrobit i gospodarka współdzielenia w cyberprzestrzeni. *Kultura i Wartości*, 153–172.

Brooks, M. (reż.). (1995). *Dracula – wampiry bez zębów* [film]. Gaumont – Brooksfilms – Castle Rock Entertainment.

Bukraba-Rylska, I. (2010). Obraz wsi w debacie publicznej po roku '89. *Wieś i Rolnictwo*, *3*, 56–72.

Callois, R. (1961/1997). *Gry i ludzie* (tłum. A. Tatarkiewicz i M. Żurowska). VOLUMEN.

Chang, A.Y. (2012). Back to the Virtual Farm: Gleaning the Agriculture-Management Game. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *19*(2), 237–252.

Charzyński, B. (2022). Styl cottagecore: sposób na przytulne wnętrza inspirowane wiejską idyllą. Poznaj najważniejsze cechy cottagecore w aranżacji. *Morele*. https://home.morele.net/wnetrza/styl-cottagecore-sposob-na-przytulne-wnetrza-inspirowane-wiejska-idylla-poznaj-najwazniejsze-cechy-cottagecore-w-aranzacji/ (data dostępu: 3.04.2024).

Chryniewicz, J.T. (2014). Społeczeństwo ryzyka. Teoria, model, analiza krytyczna. *Przegląd Socjologiczny*, *2*, 9–33.

Czapliński, P. (1999). Nuda przedstawienia albo proza najnowsza wobec istnienia. W: P. Czapliński, P. Śliwiński (red.), *Nuda w kulturze* (s. 174–186). Rebis.

Dąbrowski, A. (2014). Czym są emocje? Prezentacja wieloskładnikowej teorii emocji. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, 123–146.

Dobreprogramy.pl (bd.). *Farmerama*. https://www.dobreprogramy.pl/farmerama,program,windows,6628567848732289 (data dostępu: 26.04.2023).

Doroszewski, W. (1963). *Słownik języka polskiego*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

Drożdż-Szczybura, M. (2016). Rustykalne formy rekreacji realizowane i kreowane przez mieszkańców współczesnych miast. *Środowisko Mieszkaniowe*, 85–93.

Dziewanowska, K., & Kacprzak, A. (2013), Ekologiczna konsumpcja na pokaz. Analiza społecznych i marketingowych skutków kreowania „eko-ikon". *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego. Problemy Zarządzania, Finansów i Marketingu*, 39–53.

Eliade, M. (1970). *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów* (tłum. A. Tatarkiewicz). Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

Farca, G. (2023). Farming a Cosy Utopia: A Regenerative Escape to Simpler Times. *Conference Proceedings of DiGRA 2023*. http://digra.org:9998/DiGRA_2023_CR_3057.pdf (data dostępu: 15.04.2024).

Filiciak, M. (2010). Internet – społeczne metamedium. W: W. Godzic (red.), *Media audiowizualne* (s. 104–124). WAiP – Academica.

Foss, S.K. (1989). Rhetorical Criticism as the Asking of Questions. *Communication Education*, *3* (July), 191–196.

Gabriel, S. (2019). The Potential of Digital Games for Learning and Teaching. W: W. Elmenreich, R.R. Schallegger, F. Schnitz, S. Gabirel, G. Polsterl, W.B. Ruge (red.), *Savegame. Agency, Desing, Engineering* (s. 9–30). Springer VS.

Geertz, C. (1990). O gatunkach zmąconych (Nowe konfiguracje myśli społecznej). (Tłum. Z. Łapiński). *Teksty Drugie*, *1*(2), 113–130.

Grynaprzegladarke.net (bd.). *Gry farmerskie*. https://grynaprzegladarke.net/gry-farmerskie/ (data dostępu: 22.04.2023).

Jagusiak, J. (2023). Najlepsze gry farmerskie, o których zapominamy! *Desercik.mmo*. https://www.desercik.pl/najlepsze-gry-farmerskie-o-ktorych-zapominamy/ (data dostępu 22.04.2023).

Kozioł, P. (1998). Ekologia głęboka Arne Naessa – wizja panteistycznej religii współczesności. *Humanistyka i Przyrodoznawstwo*, *4*, 85–100.

lapisik (2017/2024), Recenzja Farmerama – najlepsza gra farmerska jaka powstała? *Gamehag*. https://gamehag.com/pl/artykuly/recenzja-farmerama---najlepsza-gra-farmerska-jaka-powstala (data dostępu: 9.01.2024).

Leśniewska, G. (2010). Wieś jako miejsce życia i pracy. W: B. Kryk (red.), *Zrównoważony rozwój obszarów wiejskich. Wybrane aspekty społeczne* (s. 128–145). Wydawnictwo Economicus.

Lewis, M.L., Weber, R., & Bowman, N.D. (2008). "They May Be Pixels, But They're MY Pixels": Developing a Metric of Character Attachment in Role-Playing Video Games. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior*, *11*(4), 515–518. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1089/cpb.2007.0137

Moskal, S. (2005). Przemiany kulturowe polskiej wsi. *Krakowskie Studia Małopolskie*, 35–43.

Sipińska, U. (1981). Chcę wyjechać na wieś [piosenka]. Na płycie *W podróży*. Wifon.

Stańczyk, M. (2019). *Czas w kinie. Doświadczenie temporalne w* Slow Cinema. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Stasiuk, A. (2001). *Opowieści galicyjskie*. Wydawnictwo Czarne.

Sulima, R. (2014). Społeczne wyobrażenia wsi na przełomie XX i XXI wieku. *Wieś i Rolnictwo*, *2*, 57–63.

Szlendak, T., Olechnicki, K. (2017). *Nowe praktyki kulturowe Polaków. Megaceremoniały i subświaty*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Śnieżko, D. (1997). *Mit wieku złotego w literaturze polskiego renesansu. Wzory – warianty – zastosowania*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Semper".

Tuan, Y.-F. (1977/1987). *Przestrzeń i miejsce* (tłum. A. Morawińska). Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

Vanderhoef, J. (2021). Casual Threats: The Feminization of Casual Video Games. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, *2*.

Waszkiewicz, A., & Bakun, M. (2020). Towards the Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *12*(3), 225–240.

Wolni Farmerzy (bd.). *Darmowe gry farmerskie na przeglądarkę*. https://www.wolnifarmerzy.pl/gry-farmerskie/ (data dostępu: 22.04.2023).

Wróblewski, M. (2009). Gra jako model społeczny. O potrzebie grania w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym. *Homo Ludens*, *1*(1), 289–301.

Ludografia

Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley*. Chucklefish.

Bigpoint. (2009–). *Farmerama*. Bigpoint.

Cleversan Software. (2021). *Farm Manager*. Play Way.

Gameloft Montreal. (2023). *Disney Dreamlight Valley*. Gameloft.

Goodgame Studios, Altigi GmBH. (2012). *Big Farm*. Goodgame Studios.

Ice Flames. (2018). *Pure Farming*. Techland.

Mydel, M., Stankiewicz, P. (2005). *Wiochmen Rejser*. Kuźnia Gier.

Mydel, M., Stankiewicz, P. (2007). *Wiochmen 2*. Kuźnia Gier.

Mydel, M., Stankiewicz, P. (2011). *Wiochmen: Wesele*. Kuźnia Gier.

Nintendo i in. (2001–2020). *Animal Crossing*. Nintendo.

Phoenix Labs. (2023). *Fae Farm*. Phoenix Labs.

Plinga. (2014). *Royal Story*.

Stairway Games. (2023). *Coral Island*. Humble Games.

Ten Square Games. (2014–). *Ale Folwark*. Ten Square Games.

ThrustVector9 [właśc. ?]. (2022). *Farmers Stealing Tanks*. Pixel Forest.

Upjers. (2009–). *Wolni Farmerzy*. Upjers.

Upjers. (2013–). *KapiFarm*. Upjers.

Wada, Y., Hashimoto, Y. (1996). *Harvest Moon*. Nintendo.

Adam Mazurkiewicz, dr hab., prof. UŁ. Badacz literatury i kultury popularnej. Współpracuje z Pracownią Badań Literatury i Kultury Popularnej oraz Nowych Mediów Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Adam Mazurkiewicz, PhD, Prof. UŁ. Researcher of popular literature and culture. He cooperates with the Research Laboratory of Popular Literature and Culture and New Media of the University of Wrocław.