

Soothing Affect or Neoliberal Indoctrination? Cozy Games and Agency

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The last few years saw a rise in popularity of cozy games and cozy game aesthetics (Campbell 2022; The Escapist 2022). Not characterized by a hypermasculine drive to successfully overcome challenges, nor by the inessentiality of player action typical of idle and incremental games, cozy games sit somewhere in the middle. This paper understands coziness as a matter of degrees (Cook 2018) that games in the cozy genre such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020) have in abundance, and proposes the concept of cozy agency to productively examine the aesthetics of such games. Doing so, on the one hand, sheds light on the kinds of interactivities and agencies designing for coziness can support or restrain; and on the other hand, speaks to why there seems to be a recent increase in the genre's visibility. Drawing on research around hobbies, gardening, and pets in sociology, leisure studies, and cultural studies (Dale 2017; Raisborough 2011; Taylor 2008), the paper examines the extent to which cozy games can be thought of as offering escapism from, or even resistance to, anxieties caused by neoliberal ideology underpinning the late-capitalist apparatus championing productivity, progress, and quantifiable result generation (Bolstanki & Chapello 2006). Inspired by recent studies into nonhegemonic forms of play (Fizek 2022; Kagen 2022), this paper presents a work in progress asking how we can better understand the kind of agencies afforded by cozy game aesthetics that challenge normative understandings of play as fast-paced, high-intensity, performance-oriented, success-driven, and achievement-focused, thereby speaking to the conference theme of limits and margins of play.

Interactivity is a core tenet of videogames, but has received criticism recently for being too binary, masculine, and dismissive of all other kinds of engagement with games (Fizek 2022; Kagen 2022; Keogh 2018; Stang 2019). Similarly, agency has a long conceptual history in the field of game studies (Jennings 2019), but recent years saw a movement toward politicizing the term and exploring the “so what” of meaningful ability to act in/with/on/through games (Chia and Ruffino 2022). Cozy aesthetics, as described by game developers in a manifesto for designing coziness (Cook 2018), offer warmth, kindness, and a sense of safety devoid of immediate time-critical threats the like of which are at the core of other prevalent genres such as action games, shooters, and role-playing games. Cozy games lend themselves well to casual play (Juul 2010) and are a kind of noncore genre (Chess & Paul 2018) requiring less time investment and therefore tend to have lower difficulty ceilings and are more accessible. Audiovisually, designing for coziness often incorporates abundance, cute animals, lush nature, soft sound design, and soothing music. While equating coziness to cuteness

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oversimplifies both (for example, the soft hues and ambient crackling coming from a fireplace are certainly cozy but not quite cute), the appeal of cozy games can be better understood through the analytical lens of cuteness. Cuteness, as both an aesthetic and an affect, creates a hierarchical relationship between the passive cute object and the agentic subject observing it (Dale 2017). In this vein, this paper argues that cozy games grant players an amplified sense of agency because they are the subject taking in the cozy object, evoking a desire to nurture, care, and tending to, similar to the affective qualities of cuteness.

This is in line with leisure studies research, which has long argued that hobbies such as gardening, a common activity in cozy games, offer tenderness, gentleness, and softness even, supporting individuals in cultivating a “caring”, “affectionate”, but also “nostalgic” and “wistful” attitude (Taylor 2008, 177). Playfulness and a sense of freedom are also often linked to gardening (Jensen & Sørensen 2019). Indeed, cozy games like the *Animal Crossing* series or *Stardew Valley* (Concerned Ape 2016) offer affective economies that evoke pastoral fantasies (NYU Game Centre 2020). At the same time, and perhaps less optimistically, sociological research into lifestyle media, such as reality tv, cooking and gardening channels, and makeover shows, has shown that such content aims not only to (re)construct the ordinary, but also to present strategies for improvement and management, which corresponds to neoliberalism’s core values of individualism and growth (Bell & Hollows 2005; Palmer 2004; Raisborough 2011). Themes common in lifestyle media, such as solving ordinary problems like domestic duties, professional advancement, and managing friendships and family relations are also central to many cozy games such as the ones mentioned above, as well as games like *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2020), and *Unpacking* (Witch Beam 2022). Resource gathering and management, especially, embodies late-capitalist themes of currency generation and perpetual growth, which promote individualistic selfhoods that are predominantly “masculinist, colonial, and extractivist” (Chia & Ruffino 2022: 309). That said, lifestyle media can also help coping with modernity and social change (Chaney 2001). Indeed, the cozy game manifesto sets satisfaction of unmet needs as one of cozy design’s primary aims (Cook 2018).

Taking all this into account, this paper offers a resolution to the tension in cozy games between soothing affect and neoliberal indoctrination by proposing the analytical concept of cozy agency. In line with recent work on games and emotions (Anable 2018; Cole & Gillies 2021; Frome 2019; Tyack & Mekler 2021), I argue that cozy games encourage affective engagement that helps coping with contemporary anxieties in everyday life due to comforting repetitive tasks that create a steady routine, a comparative lack of time-critical challenges creating a sense of safety, the abundance rather than scarcity of resources, and soothing audiovisual aesthetics. Through textual analysis (Fernández-Vara 2019) of select cozy games, this paper asks how we can better understand what this recently emerging game aesthetic says about changing needs and tastes in the late-capitalist zeitgeist. Reading the games through the forecited methodologies of affective theory and cultural studies I argue that the amplified sense of control and agency granted by the cozy object offers escapism from contemporary anxieties characterized by deprived agency in neoliberal society.

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