

Crafting Comfort: Postdigital Practices in Current Cozy Games

Bettina Bódi

University of Birmingham
31 Pritchatts Rd, Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2SD, UK
b.bodi@bham.ac.uk

Jan-Noël Thon

Osnabrück University
Neuer Graben 40
49074 Osnabrück, Germany
jan.noel.thon@uni-osnabrueck.de

Keywords

analog media, cozy games, nostalgia, postdigitality, remediation

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While ambient, slow, and wholesome games have been around for a long time (e.g., Fizek 2022; Hjorth and Richardson 2020; Kagen 2022; Scully-Baker 2024), cozy as an aesthetic signifier has become increasingly visible in recent years, carrying broad and diverse connotations in discourses around digital media in general and videogames in particular. Put in a nutshell, when used to describe videogames, it signifies a certain look and feel, in a way that transcends the conventionalized boundaries of videogame genres (e.g., Boudreau 2024; Pan and Bosman 2024). The observation that farming sim *Stardew Valley* (2016), puzzle game *Unpacking* (2021), roguelike *Cult of the Lamb* (2022), soft horror fishing game *Dredge* (2023), cooking sim *Good Pizza, Great Pizza* (2023), afterlife management game *Spiritfarer* (2020), and even the aptly titled *PowerWash Simulator* (2022) can be, and often are, described as “cozy” provides evidence of the nebulousness of the category. Regardless, some key elements of coziness are easy enough to point to: pastelly softness or playful vividity of both color palettes and sounds, a degree of cuteness, game mechanics encouraging slowness and repetition over fast-paced action, no imminent danger or frustration caused by high difficulty. From a developers’ perspective, coziness can thus be taken to refer to “the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness” (Short et al. 2018, n.p.) that is regularly evoked here. Cozy games’ themes often feature the management of natural resources, interpersonal relationships, or real-life mundane scenarios like moving house, or the day-to-day tasks and processes of a workplace. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, academic attention for the genre has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic especially, with questions explored in the existing research including feminist and inclusive design (e.g., Sullivan et al. 2023; Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020), the politics of care (e.g., Ruberg and Scully-Baker 2021; Waszkiewicz and Tyminińska 2024), capitalist critique or lack thereof (e.g., Bódi 2023; Seller 2021), and improvement to mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Barr and Copeland-Stewart 2021; Bódi 2024).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Against this background, we aim to develop another perspective on the aesthetic form of at least some cozy games that is, however, meant to complement rather than contest existing developers' and researchers' perspectives on coziness. Our starting point is the observation that many of the aforementioned cozy games not only employ what Juul (2019) would describe as an "independent style" in their overall audiovisual design but also remediate (*sensu* Bolter and Grusin 1999) or transmaterialize (*sensu* Schröter 2023) specific nondigital media technologies and practices as part of their game spaces and storyworlds. Drawing on existing research from media studies (e.g., Cramer 2015), art history (e.g., Contreras-Koterbay and Mirocha 2016), literary studies (e.g., Jordan 2019), and game studies (e.g., Thon 2025, on which the following builds), we aim to conceptualize these specific remediation processes as postdigital practices. Rather than emphasizing the "aesthetics of failure" (Cascone 2000) or "glitch aesthetics" (Betancourt 2017; Menkman 2011) that continue to be salient objects of discussion within discourses around the postdigital, our approach to postdigital practices in current cozy games thus highlights the foregrounding of nondigital aesthetics, technologies, and practices in a (post)digital context that seems to also have a certain nostalgic appeal for at least some players (e.g., Garda 2013; Heinemann 2014; Thibault 2016). The resulting analytical perspective can be applied to a broad range of cozy games, allowing for a detailed exploration of how they afford their players encounters with what may now increasingly appear as "obsolete" technologies (e.g., the contributions in Wolf 2019) and, in doing so, further strengthen the aforementioned "fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness" (Short et al. 2018, n.p.) that characterizes the genre as a whole. In order to demonstrate the heuristic value of the proposed analytical perspective, however, we also want to provide a detailed case study of a specific cozy game and the postdigital practices it affords.

The cozy game we have chosen to analyze in more detail, *Season: A Letter to the Future* (2023), is a painterly narrative exploration game from Canadian indie game developer Scavengers Studio. Set in an alternative reality with light fantasy elements, we play as Estelle, a young woman tasked with leaving her village to collect and record as much of the world as possible before the impending (and rather ominous) change in seasons. As Estelle cycles around the game spaces and the storyworld, she records sounds with a vintage-looking tape recorder, takes pictures with a polaroid camera, and scribbles down notes to preserve quotes from conversations had with non-player characters. These mementos are then collated into a scrapbook, alongside a gallery of Estelle's hand-drawn decorative doodles and embellishments. The process of scrapbooking is also how the game measures progression, with each chapter's completion making the next chapter available. The mechanics of scrapbooking are rather straightforward in *Season*: The player-as-Estelle can increase or decrease the size of images and texts, as well as rotate, layer, and move everything around. While the scrapbook is designed to appear like a real-world book, and the audiovisual design of *Season* generally highlighting the nondigital materiality of the tape recorder, the polaroid camera, and the scrapbook, Estelle can also include sounds recorded in the scrapbook, thereby breaking the illusion of materiality. The mechanical simplicity of the game is further complimented by lyrical and contemplative writing, with most of the content taking the form of monologues, performed by experienced voice actors, many of whom were theater-trained. The visual style of the game is inspired by the watercolor and oil landscapes of British illustrator and poster designer Norman Wilkinson as well as the globally recognizable style of Studio Ghibli (Scavengers Studio 2022). Mechanically, stylistically, and affectively, *Season* thus encourage the players to slow down, take in the environment, and focus on sensory stimuli, affording a gameplay experience akin to a decidedly postdigital 10-hour-long guided meditation.

REFERENCES

- Barr, M., and Copeland-Stewart, A. 2022. "Playing Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects on Players' Well-Being." *Games and Culture* 17 (1): 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211017036>
- Betancourt, M. 2017. *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge.
- Black Salt Games. 2023. *Dredge*. Windows. Team17.
- Bódi, B. 2023. "Soothing Affect or Neoliberal Indoctrination? Cozy Games and Agency." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2023*. <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/2072/2071>
- Bódi, B. 2024. "The Duality of Cozy Games: Cozy Agency, Neoliberalism, and Affect." *Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 11 (1): 51–64. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2391-8551.11.04>
- Bolter, J. D., and Grusin, R. 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press.
- Boudreau, K. 2024. "Beyond Aesthetics: Players, Player-Characters and Interactivity-as-Demand in Cozy Games." *Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 12 (1): 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2391-8551.12.04>
- Chucklefish. 2016. *Stardew Valley*. Windows. Concerned Ape.
- Contreras-Koterbay, S., and Mirocha, Ł. 2016. *The New Aesthetic and Art: Constellations of the Postdigital*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Cramer, F. 2015. "What Is 'Post-Digital'?" In *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, edited by D. M. Berry and M. Dieter, 12–26. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- de Pan, G., and Bosman, F. 2024. "If All Is Cozy, What Isn't? Some Conceptual Problems Regarding Cozy Games." *Into the Magic Circle* 1 (1): 1–11. <https://intothemagiccircle.org/article/view/18928/20834>
- Fizek, S. 2022. *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Videogame Aesthetic*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press.
- FuturLab. 2022. *PowerWash Simulator*. Windows. Square Enix Collective.
- Garda, M. B. 2013. "Nostalgia in Retro Game Design." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013*. <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/651>
- Heinemann, D. S. 2014. "Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia." *Journal of Games Criticism* 1 (1): 1–24. <https://gamescriticism.org/2023/07/19/public-memory-and-gamer-identity-retrogaming-as-nostalgia/>
- Hjorth, L., and Richardson, I. 2020. *Ambient Play*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press.
- Jordan, S. 2020. *Postdigital Storytelling: Poetics, Praxis, Research*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge.
- Juul, J. 2019. *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press.
- Kagen, M. 2022. *Wandering Games*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press.

- Massive Monster. 2022. *Cult of the Lamb*. Windows. Devolver Digital.
- Menkman, R. 2011. *The Glitch Moment(um)*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Ruberg, B., and Scully-Baker, R. 2021. "Making Players Care: The Ambivalent Cultural Politics of Care and Video Games." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24 (4): 655–672. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920950323>
- Scavengers Studio. 2022. "The Art Direction of *Season*." *Season Dev Blog*, 19 January. <https://www.play-season.com/post/january-2022-the-art-direction-of-season>
- Scavengers Studio. 2023. *Season: A Letter to the Future*. Windows. Scavengers Studio.
- Schröter, J. 2023. "Intermediality and Computer Simulation." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality*, edited by J. Bruhn, A. López-Varela Azcárate, and M. de Paiva Vieira, 1135–1146. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scully-Baker, R. 2024. "The Politics of Wholesome Games: Conservative Comforts and Radical Softness." *Configurations* 32 (2): 129–143. <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2024.a924126>
- Seller, M. (2021). "Ever-Lockdown: Waiting through Times of Playbour and Pandemic in *Animal Crossing*." *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 14 (1): 100–116. <https://doi.org/10.31165/nk.2021.141.635>
- Short, T.X., Ordon, A., Hurd, D., Howe, C., Forbes, J., Eiserloh, S., Diaz, J., Cook, D., and Meiners, R. 2018. "Cozy Games." *Lostgarden*, 24 January. <https://lostgarden.com/2018/01/24/cozy-games/>
- Sullivan, A., Stanfill, M., and Salter, A. "The Constraints of Cozy Games: *Boyfriend Dungeon* and Consent in Queer Play." *Proceedings of FDG 2023*. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3582437.3582452>
- TapBlaze. 2023. *Good Pizza, Great Pizza*. Windows. TapBlaze.
- Thibault, M. 2016. "Post-Digital Games: The Influence of Nostalgia in Indie Games' Graphic Regimes." *Gamevironments* 4: 1–23.
- Thon, J.-N. 2025. "Postdigital Aesthetics in Recent Indie Games." In *Metareference and Videogames: Mapping the Margins of an Interdisciplinary Field*, edited by Theresa Krampe and Jan-Noël Thon, 221–283. New York, NY, USA: Routledge.
- Thunder Lotus Games. 2020. *Spiritfarer*. Windows. Thunder Lotus Games.
- Waszkiewicz, A., and 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>
- Waszkiewicz, A., and Tymińska, M. 2024. "Cozy Games and Resistance through Care." *Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 11 (1): 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2391-8551.11.01>
- Witch Beam. 2021. *Unpacking*. Windows. Humble Bundle.
- Wolf, M. J. P., ed. 2019. *The Routledge Companion to Media Technology and Obsolescence*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge.