

Virtual Roads, Real Ecologies: Driving Games, Coziness, and Petroculture

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It is nigh impossible to imagine a world without oil. Infrastructures of its extraction, distribution, and use are omnipresent in late capitalism regardless of where in the world we are. This is true whether we are looking at the macro scale of industries and organisations, or the micro scale of everyday life. While there is an increasing sense of anxiety associated with oil consumption (“petromelancholia” in DeMenager 2014), oil-fuelled practices are also deeply ingrained in the formation of identities, especially relating to gender (“petromasculinity” in Daggett 2018). Video games have long been associated with hypermasculinity, despite studies and market research consistently proving that they are no longer exclusively a male domain (Chess 2017; ESA 2024; Ruberg 2019; Video Games Europe 2023). The genre of driving games, alongside shooters, strategy games, and sport games, is especially interlinked with this assumption of who plays games and why. While some driving games, like Nintendo’s *Mario Kart* series (1992–), can hide punishingly hard gameplay under a veneer of gleeful silliness, others, like Sony’s *Gran Turismo* (1997–) and Microsoft’s *Forza Horizon* (2005–) franchises typically feature male avatars, and glamorise cars, driving, and the consumption of non-renewable sources of energy for fuel and parts. By doing so, they contribute to the reinforcement of the connection between petroculture and masculinity, representing video games’ reluctance to imagine a world beyond oil (op de Beke 2024). This paper looks at some counterexamples to argue that it is perhaps in nonhegemonic forms of play, such as slow play and coziness, that we can find video games distancing and letting go. I look at counterexamples that are nostalgic for different times: a time with functioning public services, playing a postie in the 1980s in *Lake* (Gamious 2021); and a time with less densely populated areas, cycling around in *Season: A Letter to the Future* (Scavengers 2023).

Coziness is a nebulous aesthetic category that transcends boundaries of genre (Bódi 2024; Waszkiewicz and Tymińska 2024). Generally speaking however, it can be applied to games incorporating elements of safety, abundance, and softness (Short et al. 2018). This often results in gameplay experiences that are different from the usual rhetoric of competition, progress, and urgency found in most games. Cozy driving games challenge hegemonic expectations of genre and forms of play: while operating vehicles is a core mechanic, the emphasis is less on acceleration – of speed, of growth,

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of progress – and more on deceleration. As such, they introduce a different kind of a way of sensing and measuring time according to infrastructures of fuel extraction management (“petroduration” in op de Beke 2024). Both *Lake* and *Season* encourage slowing down and appreciating the world around us. In *Lake*, we play as forty-something Meredith returning to her hometown to provide holiday cover for her postman father, to escape the pressures of her big city job. Each day is spent driving around a picturesque lakeside town in Oregon, USA, in a robust, easy to control van, listening to country music, and delivering people’s mail. We also take on side quests from various townies, which tend to encourage diversion from the day-to-day responsibilities: test out a film camera by taking photos around the lake, deliver VHS tapes to locals, and so on. We slowly get more and more immersed in the lives of locals, with options to romance a moody lumberjack withdrawn from society, or quirky queer movie rental owner. Audiovisually, thematically, and narratively, the game resembles a Hallmark rom-com (Braithwaite 2023), an association further supported by a Christmas-themed DLC *Lake: Season’s Greetings* (Gamious 2024). *Lake* is a complex case study, because on the one hand it is a cozy driving game, challenging genre expectations both representationally and mechanically. There are no achievements to be won, safe driving is encouraged, there are intricate neighbourhood cat petting mechanics, and the female protagonist is more concerned complaining to the local radio station DJ about playlists than upgrading her carburetor. But it also exemplifies a nostalgic longing for times of Easy Oil, a fantasy of replete resources unburdened by worries about the ethics and ecological consequences of oil-reliance (LeMenager 2014). *Lake* can therefore be seen to simultaneously challenge but also uphold the status quo of petroculture.

Painterly narrative exploration game *Season: A Letter to the Future* is nostalgic for technologies and modes of transport less reliant on oil: analogue devices and cycling. Set in an anachronistic alternate reality, player character Estelle leaves her village to document and record as much of her world as possible before a portentous change in seasons. As the player explores the gameworld on Estelle’s vintage bicycle, they use a tape recorder to capture sounds, a Polaroid camera to take pictures, and a notebook to jot down quotes from conversations with non-player characters, which can then be organized into a scrapbook. The game’s mechanical simplicity is complemented by lyrical and contemplative writing, and a visual style that draws inspiration from the watercolor and oil landscapes of British illustrator and poster designer Norman Wilkinson, as well as Japanese Studio Ghibli’s animation style (Scavanger 2022). By inviting the player to slow down, rewarding meandering, wandering, and contemplating through the beautifully rendered game environments, the game’s design deliberately discourages goal- and performance driven play, allowing for thoughtful recording of the game’s natural world and its inhabitants (“nature playing” in Fizek 2024). Looking at these two case studies, this paper thus explores how theories of petroculture, nostalgia, and coziness meet at a crossroads, thereby engaging with the conference subtheme of games in a time of crisis. I argue that nonhegemonic forms of play, such as slow play and coziness, while still struggling to completely detach, can nonetheless facilitate video games distance themselves from oil dependency and help imagine a world beyond oil.

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