

# Cozy History? Frameworks, Contrasts, and Affect in Cozy Historical Video Games

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The field of historical game studies has often argued that games set in historical periods and settings are characterized by their high reliance on violence (Serrano Lozano 2020), conquest and empire-building (Lowe 2009, 68), resource management (Chapman 2016, 126), and technological progression (Flegler 2020). Additionally, many historical games employ cinematic aesthetics to offer a seemingly photorealistic or ‘authentic’ image of the past (Campbell 2008; Clare 2021; Machado 2020). Many of these games are also often used in pedagogical contexts (e.g., McCall 2011/2023). While there are, naturally, many individual exceptions to this rather generalizing description of historical games, it remains legitimate to consider some of the broad strokes of history in games as predicated on violence, empires, aspired visual authenticity, and its potentially ‘serious’ educational application.

Nevertheless, there are specific genres of historical games which, as a whole, seem to challenge the dominant languages of history in games. In this presentation, I focus on a recent wave of cozy games with historical inspirations (by extension, I also include several titles with mythological content), and I explore how these cozy games present new frameworks of historical engagement or, in other words, of ‘doing’ history. Cozy games are games marked by “safety, abundance, and softness” (Short et al. 2018) – terms now rephrased as “ludic”, “narrative” and “visual safety” (Waszkiewicz 2024, 112) – and conventionally feature non-hyperkinetic action, stylized aesthetics, cute characters, and a lack of potentially stressful game elements (e.g., fast countdowns, boss fights). Prototypical examples include *Stardew Valley* (2016, ConcernedApe), *A Short Hike* (2019, Robinson-Yu) and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020, Nintendo EPD). They have recently gained large popularity in game studies, particularly given an extensive series of articles in *Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies*.

At the intersection of historical and cozy games lie titles such as *Tiny Glade* (2024, Pounce Light), a ‘diorama builder’ where players create medieval castles and cottages in cutesy aesthetics and natural environments. In the Slavic mythology-inspired *REKA*

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(2024, Emberstorm Entertainment), players are an apprentice of the witch Baba Jaga, and forage through the woods to build their chicken-legged homestead. The somewhat similar survival games *Valheim* (2021, Iron Gate AB) and *Dawn of Defiance* (2024, Traega Entertainment), set respectively in Norse and Greek mythology, allow them to create their own settlements which they can customize with recognizable architectural and archaeological archetypes (e.g., Greek vases, columns, and furniture; Scandinavian banners, round tables, Yule trees). Even an otherwise more ‘serious’ game like *Manor Lords* (2024, Slavic Magic), inspired by late fourteenth-century Franconia, could be seen as a potentially cozy game, as players establish their own medieval city, through which they can subsequently wander in a third-person perspective. Notably, *Manor Lords*’ lowest difficulty setting (‘Relaxing’) eliminates the possibility of hostile raider attacks, thereby allowing players to focus fully on their settlement. Additionally, several historical games that likely respond more difficultly to the label of ‘cozy’ have been described by players as susceptible to forms of cozy gaming: examples include *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018, Ubisoft Quebec) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018, Rockstar Games), which offer sprawling historical worlds that players have been known to approach in cozy ways (Collins 2023; u/so\_finch 2023; u/Sinotej 2024).

A prominent strand in cozy game research relates to how coziness can paradoxically be present in games or genres that, at first glance, would avoid being classified as such, like *No Man’s Sky* (2016, Hello Games), horror games, or first-person zombie shooters (Gnat 2024; Waszkiewicz 2024; Smith 2024). I argue that a similar process potentially operates in the context of history: if historical video games are indeed ‘serious’ affairs characterized mainly by violence, conquest, and expansion, then elements of coziness might not immediately appear here. Yet, my previous examples show that history and coziness *can* certainly meet, and in this presentation, I argue that the resultant combination leads to a new mode of ‘doing’ history in games.

Particularly, a cozy mode of historical games foregrounds the following elements:

- Building and creating (see *Tiny Glade*; *REKA*; *Dawn of Defiance*; *Valheim*; *Manor Lords*);
- Nature (*Tiny Glade*; *REKA*; *Dawn of Defiance*; *Valheim*; *Manor Lords*);
- A general absence of specific historical timeframes, characters, and locations, in favor of more atmospherical/ethereal histories with several recognizable names and a loose spatiotemporal setting (*Tiny Glade*; *REKA*; *Dawn of Defiance*; *Valheim*);
- A complete (*Tiny Glade*; *REKA*) or potential (*Manor Lords*) absence of violence, or “cozy saferoom[s]” (Smith 2024, 8) offering “situational safety” (Waszkiewicz 2024, 116) from combat (*Dawn of Defiance*; *Valheim*);
- Collectives (*Tiny Glade*; *Manor Lords*) and group experiences (*Dawn of Defiance*; *Valheim*).
- Cartoony, low poly, or non-photorealist aesthetics (*Tiny Glade*; *REKA*; *Valheim*).

Several of these elements have previously featured in cozy game studies: see, for example, Waszkiewicz & Bakun (2020) on feelings of collective belonging and the safety of non-violence, Bódi (2024, 58–60) and Pinder (2024) on the “vegetal”/environmental preoccupation of many cozy games, or Smith (2024, 15) on multiplayer socialization. Additionally, most of these features directly contrast conventions in other historical genres where, for instance, history is represented with

lavishly detailed graphics, or where violence, destruction, and ruins (Lowe 2012) are prioritized over building, creating, and the collective.

I argue that the combined articulation of these elements results in a type of history that strongly emphasizes affect. Bódi (2024, 58) previously linked cozy games with affect, noting that they evoke “a desire to nurture, care, and tend to”. In the context of history, this means that players frequently take care of their own, self-produced historical environment (e.g., their cottage in *Tiny Glade*, their *REKA* homestead), being offered the tools to play with historical elements in ways that correspond to their own personal preferences. Such emotional connections open new insights in historical game studies – on par with other calls towards diversifying existing categorizations in the field (e.g., Houghton 2023) – and ask us to take into account broader types of player engagement with historical games. Cozy history is, above all, affective history, not just involving players in a specific or authentic region of the past, but allowing them to be emotionally invested in their own constructed presence within it.

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