Making Cozy Games:

How Game Developers Build (and Talk about) Cozy Games

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INTRODUCTION

Cozy games are popular, yet difficult to pin down. Originally formalized during Project Horseshoe, a think-tank style conference in 2017 which produced a white paper on cozy games (Short, et al, 2018), the genre has also garnered growing attention from game studies academics, interested in better understanding this rapidly growing interest in cozy game design and played experiences (Bodi, 2024; Boudreau, Consalvo & Phelps, 2025).

Yet cozy games do not exist in a vacuum. As Boudreau, Consalvo & Phelps (2025) point out, what constitutes "cozy" cannot be solely defined by game developers – game players and game journalists/reviewers have also been active in meaning making. For example, game journalists have pointed to aesthetics as a core component of cozy games, with calm visuals and tranquil vistas. Likewise, cozy gamer TikTok content creators broaden the definition of "cozy" through their inclusion of physical gaming spaces, their clothing choices, and other elements (Boudreau, Consalvo & Phelps, 2025). Yet how does the wider community of game developers define cozy games? Is there agreement with the conclusions of the 2017 whitepaper, or are developers

broadening the genre, augmenting it with their own ideas of what cozy games should be? To answer those questions, this paper investigates how game developers have incorporated PH's original cozy games' elements, and also what – if any – augmentations they have brought into cozy game production.

METHOD

This paper will examine 20-30 YouTube videos made by both amateur and professional game developers who are building self-identified cozy games. Examples of videos include "Making a cozy fantasy game in Unity," "Making cozy games is hard, actually," and "How to (accidentally) make a cozy game." Selected videos are at least 5minutes in length and have been published in the past three years. Videos have been chosen by keyword search on YouTube using the terms "cozy game" "developer" "development" and "how to make" in various combinations.

Videos are in the process of being fully analyzed, but will be studied deductively, to determine if they contain elements (mechanics, art styles, themes, narratives) that have formally been identified as cozy (specifically the themes of safety, abundance, softness) and how. Videos will also be studied inductively to determine what additional elements the developer sees as contributing to the game's coziness, with particular attention to components that differ from early definitions of cozy games.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary study of a set of a dozen videos already finds variability in how developers talk about and present their development activities. First, there are both explicit and implicit types of discourse around cozy game elements. Second, game developers often make comparisons to well established games in the cozy games genre to help position their own game in that space, engaging in a form of 'game talk' to do so (O'Donnell, 2014).

Explicit Discourse

In some videos, developers point to specific elements of their game and explain what makes them cozy. For example, in "How to (accidentally) make a cozy game", developer "advancenine" explains how he realized he was making a cozy game only after development had begun, when he realized that *Night Stones* already contained recognized cozy elements such as the lack of timed elements and an open, colorful world to explore. In the video, advancenine details various cozy game elements, and then shows the viewer how his own game fits that definition. This, he explains, has helped him to better market his game, as he has found a new audience – cozy gamers – for his game.

Implicit Discourse

While some developers make explicit the design elements that they believe fall into the "cozy" universe, others treat cozy as a taken-for-granted label, positioning their game in that space but not actively explaining what makes their game fit in. In "Making a cozy game in Scratch for the day" developer "goodgis" quickly puts together a game about a duck cooking in a kitchen that tries to swat away flies. However, goodgis offers

little explanation for how or why the game would be considered cozy. For example, during the middle of a coding segment, the creator announces after adding a sound effect, "not gonna lie, this game is starting to feel really cozy" yet offering no justification for that claim. The one explicit element the creator mentions is the game's lack of an ending, described as "my whole thought about a cozy game is, it never ends. It's endless." For goodgis, cozy games are akin to older more established genres such as platformers – a developer would never have to explain why they added multiple levels to a platformer game, and so the same could be said of cozy games.

Game Talk

In studies of AAA game developers, Casey O'Donnell mentions the prevalence of "game talk"– a shorthand way of describing game design elements. To function, the discourse depends on developers' common knowledge of games, so they can explain, for example, that their own game has Skyrim-like dragons but a Rimworld-style interface. In the videos examined, many developers referred to a variety of well-established cozy games, both to draw distinctions from and commonalities to their own games. Developer MeniMeno explained how she wanted her cozy fairy game to be a place where the player could create their own worlds, bringing in references to The Sims, Minecraft, Terraria, and Stardew Valley as games that offered players similar systems. Taking a slightly different tack, developer Frog Hollow explained that he wanted his game to be similar to a platformer, but different, because traditional platformers included the risk of failure, and because his game was cozy, it could/would not do that.

INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

Developers are not yet unified in how they discuss and make cozy games. This makes sense, as this category of game is still evolving. As with the emergence of a genre, the terminology and design characteristics of cozy games is a socially negotiated construct between game designers and developers, the trade and professional press that reviews and examines these games, and the fans, streamers, and players of cozy games. As each of these communities slowly converges on their own definitions, the emergence of what constitutes cozy in video games may continue to shift greatly over time.

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