Arctictopia and its Cozy, Casual Climate Catastrophe

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the puzzle game *Arctictopia* as an example to problematize how cozy, casual video games frame the climate crisis through cute aesthetics and easily accessible gameplay mechanics. While this strategy might work to raise awareness for ecological degradation, it also turns navigating precarious environments into a pleasurable activity. Concerning the conference theme of "Intersectional Pleasures", this paper focuses on who gets to experience imagery of melting polar ice as a pleasurable diversion, rather than as an existential threat. Based on an analysis informed by both ecocritical and postcolonial approaches, I read *Arctictopia*'s narrative, audiovisual elements, and gameplay mechanics, as well as the reception of the game as emblematic of a type of cozy eco-aesthetics, that gestures towards addressing the climate crisis while simultaneously encouraging wholesome feelings in consumers – thus, making visible the ambivalences and contradictions inherent in how cozy games can represent the climate crisis and its effects.

Keywords

Puzzle game, cozy games, climate crisis, casual games, ecocriticism, postcolonial game studies

INTRODUCTION: *ARCTICTOPIA* AS A COZY ECOGAME

At least since the publication and commercial success of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) in 2020, cozy games (very loosely defined here as video games designed to make their players feel good through cute aesthetics, wholesome narratives and/or easily accessible, repetitive gameplay mechanics) have become a mass phenomenon, leading to the publication of a large number of video games that address a broad range of thematic concerns (cf. Waszkiewicz et al. 2024, 7-8). Among those topics, anthropogenic climate change figures prominently, with games like *Coral Island* (Stairway Games 2023), *Loddlenaut* (Moon Lagoon 2023), or *Terra Nil* (Free Lives 2023) all featuring storylines centered on ecological restoration. Cozy games have been ascribed the ability to "create safe spaces to explore the ecological effects of human actions with the aim of prompting reflection and action on environmental issues" (Pinder 2024, 125). *Arctictopia* (Gamtropy 2021), the game under analysis in my paper, can be considered as part of this trend: At its core, *Arctictopia* is a digital puzzle game (i.e., a game presenting players with puzzles that can be solved through

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logical deduction, pattern recognition, trial and error or any combination of the above) that has players move the playable character of a polar bear mother[1] across melting ice floes to reunite with her cub. The number of moves an ice floe can make before melting is indicated by attached ice chunks, one of which disappears after each move made. If players fail in their task and the ice floe disintegrates on the open sea, the polar bear mother falls into the ocean, where she drifts in place in a rather relaxed manner until players restart the level. There is no time limit nor any maximum number of attempts for each level, which creates a leisurely gameplay experience. *Arctictopia*'s soundscape, with its cheerful but unobtrusive instrumental score and visual design marked by cartoonish illustrations, emphasizes this impression of *Arctictopia* as a cozy, child-friendly video game.

Whereas ecogames have been the subject of a broad scholarly debate as publications like John Parham's 2015 *Green Media and Popular Culture*, Alenda Y. Chang's 2019 *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*, or (more recently) Laura Op de Beke et al.'s 2024 edited collection *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis* attest, the category of cozy games does not (yet) figure prominently in those discussions. Analogously, cozy games have received increased academic attention from 2020 onwards (culminating so far in a 2024 special issue of the journal *Replay* on the topic), but ecological themes have only been discussed scarcely. A notable exception is Morgan Pinder's 2024 article on "Negotiating Anthropocentrism and Ecologies in Cozy Games," in which they argue that cozy games exhibit a unique potential to engage players in questions of "ecological awareness and agency" (134). My paper builds on and complicates Pinder's insights by critically reflecting on the potential affordances of cozy games with regard to coping with the current climate crisis. In so doing, I expand ongoing ecocritical debates on cozy games with a postcolonial perspective and use this theoretical background to identify the emergence of a certain type of cozy eco-aesthetics that endeavors to combine drawing attention to climate change while still encouraging pleasant feelings in consumers. Using the puzzle game *Arctictopia* as an example, my paper seeks to problematize how cozy, casual video games appropriate the climate crisis through cute aesthetics and accessible gameplay mechanics. While this strategy might work to raise awareness for ecological degradation, it also turns navigating precarious environments into a pleasurable activity. Picking up the conference's theme of "Intersectional Pleasures", this paper asks: Who gets to experience imagery of melting polar ice as a pleasurable diversion, rather than as an existential threat?

I argue that *Arctictopia*'s narrative, audiovisual elements, and gameplay mechanics, as well as the reception of the game, make visible the ambivalences and contradictions inherent in how cozy games can represent the climate crisis and its effects. The first section of this paper focuses on the generic affordances of cozy games by undertaking a representational analysis of *Arctictopia*'s audiovisual design and gameplay mechanics. By putting both postcolonial approaches (based on the works of Souvik Mukherjee and Soraya Murray) and ecocritical concepts (building on the work of Alenda Y. Chang and Justyna Włodarczyk) into conversation with cozy game criticism (including works by Andrea Andiloro, Bettina Bódi, and Jacqueline Moran), my paper problematizes the wider implications of *Arctictopia*'s representation of the polar environment and the animals inhabiting it. *Arctictopia*'s audiences are at the center of the second section of my paper. I contextualize *Arctictopia* as a casual game before providing an overview of the game's user reviews (many of which do not even mention its ecological theming), and to stay with the conference theme of "Intersectional Pleasures", I set out to call into question whose

pleasure *Arctictopia* enables with its cozy aesthetics and casual gameplay and whose suffering remains unacknowledged. Overall, I read *Arctictopia* as emblematic of a type of cozy eco-aesthetics that addresses the climate crisis in a manner that inspires wholesome feelings in consumers. The (admittedly rather obvious) example of *Arctictopia* makes visible what those cozy eco-aesthetics look and feel like and how they are put to work in ecogames. Thus, my contribution uses the insights gained from the analysis of a specific game to make a broader case for considering cozy eco-aesthetics as a potentially productive mode of engagement with the climate crisis in entertainment media.

CLIMATE CRISIS, COZY PICTURE BOOK STYLE

Arctictopia announces its central themes right from the beginning of the game. Players are greeted with a cutscene in the form of an animated cartoon with cute picture book-like aesthetics that shows the protagonist polar bears walking along the icescape, catching fish to feed themselves and growing increasingly sweaty due to warm temperatures visually represented by sunshine, right before introducing its basic premise: The polar bear mother and her cub find themselves on separate ice floes that immediately drift apart with the polar bear cub crying and its mother looking worried. The short clip that is less than a minute long is accompanied by cheerful piano music as well as the diegetic sounds of the ocean waves and seagulls screeching. In this cutscene, the Arctic appears as a space of idyllic animal/family life that is, however, threatened by climate change. As such, the opening act of *Arctictopia* remains caught up in a stereotypical untouched nature/ brink of disaster binary of representing the polar regions. In the first half of the video clip, a romanticized image of the Arctic as an uninhabited place of supposedly untamed natural beauty with abundant wildlife is produced, whereas its second half creates tension by playing into familiar visions of the Arctic as doomed to melt into oblivion (without, however, acknowledging the human impact on those processes).

Even before any gameplay elements are present, the introductory cutscene already indicates to players what kind of video game *Arctictopia* aspires to be: a cozy game. *Arctictopia*'s very first moments encompass the major design elements that Bódi identifies as typical for cozy games, i.e., a visual design marked by "less saturated colour palettes, rounded shapes, and an almost painterly style", "soft and unthreatening sound design that lacks sharp loud noises, an ambient soundtrack, a focus on nature sounds" and "cute aesthetics" (2024, 58). Thus, despite the precarious circumstances of a mother and her cub dramatically separated in the cutscene, the deliberately cute visual design and calm soundscape put players at ease, with its picture book-like look raising expectations of a happy ending, no matter how alarming events might turn out in the meantime. Building on Soraya Murray's idea of reading in-game "landscape as political feeling" (2021, 14), the nostalgic picture book visuals of *Arctictopia* risk creating an "aesthetic encounter, which concentrates an affective experience of the wish to take things back to a [former supposed] greatness" (2021, 17), inviting players to reminisce about the (presumably) good old days of having children's books read to them by their parents - which in itself might be problematized as classist (for more information on the entanglement of cozy games and classism, see Andiloro 2024, 85) - instead of acknowledging the dangers that the current climate crisis poses to those living in the Arctic. In-game cozy landscapes can thus be considered as trafficking in seemingly depoliticized nostalgia that nevertheless "aesthetically cues the player to the ambient shared feeling of the game [… that] is ideologically powerful, though ephemeral" (Murray 2021, 14): In the case of

Arctictopia, this ambient shared feeling is one of ease, comfort, and safety as experienced by players that forms an ironic contrast to the feelings of struggle, stress and precarity that the game's narrative assigns to its polar bear protagonists.

From an animal studies perspective, cute representations of animals "as a tool of political activism" are often regarded as "a double-edged sword", according to Justyna Włodarczyk (2024, 3). She explains that "[w]hile the strategy of expanding the circle of moral concern [through depicting animals as cute] may have broad public appeal, it has also been criticized [...] as reproducing outdated humanist paradigms, i.e., making us care only about those animals we deem to be the most like us" (Włodarczyk 2024, 3). This tension is also at play in *Arctictopia* where, on the one hand, the cute visual design of the game can work to sidestep players' potential hesitancy to engage with a burdensome topic such as climate change, whereas on the other hand, the game also privileges ascribing human traits to its animal protagonists over representing them in a realistic fashion (e.g., by casting seals in the role of polar bears and orcas' friends instead of their food source or by having the polar bears express sadness through crying in a human-like manner). This employment of cute visuals is typical for cozy games, as Bódi suggests, arguing that "cute aesthetics can thus grant players an amplified sense of agency because they are the subject taking in the cozy object, evoking a desire to nurture, care, and tend to" (2024, 58). In doing so, "cozy games with cute aesthetics provide strategies to reinstate a sense of control lost in our struggle for ontological security, providing the opportunity to turn a hostile world on its head, reinforcing agency by disarming its threats," Bódi continues (2024, 58). Whereas it may be tempting to read *Arctictopia* as part of this trend, giving players the agency to reunite the little polar bear family again and again through their capacity for logical thinking and problem-solving, this paper seeks to expose such a conclusion as a fallacy. My close reading of *Arctictopia*'s comic strips will show how, eventually, any sense of achievement players may have felt due to completing the levels rings hollow when the last panel of the final cartoon hints at the fact that human extractivist activities in the Arctic will worsen the environmental degradation affecting the region.

After *Arctictopia*'s introductory cutscene, its final still of a sobbing cub and anxious mother blends into the title credits of the game, followed by the appearance of its main menu. The menu shows a cartoonesque snow-covered landscape with conifers and a puffin in the foreground to the left. In the right corner, the screen explains which keys players need to press (or which areas of the screen to tap if playing on a mobile device) to review the introductory cutscene (and the subsequent comic strips that are unlocked throughout the game) and to open the game's overall map. At the center of the menu, players see the polar bear mother standing on an ice floe in what looks like a river with a speech balloon over her head that indicates the number of the level and which collectible animals (i.e., puffin, seal, or both) are featured in it (through stylized icons of each animal's head). At the beginning, only the first level is accessible; further levels have to be unlocked. Whereas it is initially sufficient to merely complete each level by reuniting mother and cub to unlock the next one, more advanced levels require players to additionally collect a minimum number of puffins and seals to progress further. Thus, although collecting the polar bears' animal sidekicks is presented as an optional task to increase the degree of difficulty at first, making that action a prerequisite to accessing all levels of *Arctictopia* incentivizes picking up as many animals as possible.

The main menu thus continues the stereotypical patterns of representing the Arctic as uninhabited, untouched nature that the previous cutscene already introduced.

Furthermore, the existence of an unlockable map has clear colonialist undertones that echo the imperialist-expansionist impetus of (particularly European) nineteenth-century polar exploration. As such, the menu is an example of how, to use Soraya Murray's words, "a map becomes a complex representation of potential objectives and notions of progress" (2018, 171). The link between in-game maps and imperialist ideologies has been the subject of a broad scholarly discussion, with Souvik Mukherjee arguing that many (particularly strategy) video games feature "maps that *perpetuate* the logic of colonialism instead of challenging it" (2017, 31, emphasis in original). Alenda Y. Chang calls this phenomenon "the cartographic impulse" that casts players in the role of an "explorer [who] sets about penetrating the unknown and testing personal and geographical limits" (2019, 135). The incremental numbering of the levels suggests a narrative of continued, linear progress (even though players can go back to replay any level they already completed), while the requirement to amass resources (in the form of seals and puffins) to unlock further levels turns the cute little animal icons that adorn the speech balloon over the polar bear's head into hunting trophies thereby threatening to undermine the environmentalist agenda of *Arctictopia*. This type of tension between narrative and gameplay mechanics is found in many cozy games, as Bódi explains: "Such games offer an opportunity to both critique everything that is wrong with our world, provide strategies for controlling the uncontrollable [...], but at the same time they continue to lock us into the same very logics of growth, progress, pressure, and individual responsibility that we are trying to escape from" (2024, 57). On the one hand, *Arctictopia* critiques how climate change endangers Arctic wildlife, but on the other hand, its gameplay mechanics privilege the gratuitous accumulation of resources and individualist solutions to structural problems.

In the first playable level, the directions for moving the ice floes are displayed in the top left of the screen (unless players use a mobile device, in which case they simply tap the screen to move the floes), and players can intuitively grasp that their job is to reunite both bears by navigating the polar bear mother across melting ice floes. Once players have succeeded in their task, a still shows mother and cub happily hugging each other, accompanied by a triumphant jingle, before the next level can be started by pressing a button. As players progress through increasingly complex levels, *Arctictopia* introduces new gameplay mechanics: from levels 2 and 4 respectively, the collectable seal and puffin begin to appear, level 5 brings obstacles in the form of icebergs into play, from level 13 onwards there are waves determining the direction in which one can move the ice floe and from level 26 onwards players encounter orcas that both function as moving obstacles and can be used strategically to support one's movement, as they can push ice floes without causing them to melt. Levels 39 and 44 introduce cold and hot currents, respectively, that either prolong or reduce the durability of one's ice floe, while levels from 51 onwards feature water vortices that work as portals transporting one's ice floe from one vortex to the next. While these types of gameplay mechanics (i.e., collectable objects, obstacles, or portals) are standard fare for puzzle games, *Arctictopia*'s theming of them as either fauna (seals, puffins, and orcas) or natural marine phenomena (icebergs, waves, currents, and water vortices) geographically situates the game in its polar setting. It also stages the Arctic Ocean as a digital playground that poses barriers to players' movement, which can, however, be overcome through logical thinking and strategic action. The predictable nature of gameplay elements and the solvability of every level, hence, works to create a sense of mastery (and achievement, once a level has been completed) in players. As such, the polar environment of *Arctictopia* might be read as an "example of commercially dominant cozy games [… in which] the player engages

in anthropocentric coziness, which grants them complete control over their environment [… and which] reduces risk and minimizes the demands on the player's attention" (Pinder 2024, 129). Thus, the environmental factors that, at first, may appear threatening turn out to be nothing but small challenges for players to conquer on their way towards greatness.

Through its gameplay mechanics, *Arctictopia* encourages what Murray calls "an opportunistic and exploitative form of observation," staging "the game space and all that is within it from the viewpoint of its prospective use-value for the player" (Murray 2018, 171-172). This notion of absolute player control over one's environment becomes particularly apparent through levels that require a strategic melting of individual ice floes to be solved. In those instances, *Arctictopia*'s narrative of the harmful effects of thawing polar ice is in direct tension with its gameplay mechanics that necessitate the strategic melting of ice floes in the interest of in-game progress. Akin to Bódi's observation that particularly video games with farming sim elements offer players "a power fantasy that amplifies our sense of agency as we master the environment" (2024, 59), the players' interaction with the polar environment goes beyond simply navigating it towards actively shaping it by causing the melting of inconvenient ice floes. This sense of control is amplified by the game giving players the option to undo any of their actions by pressing a button (or tapping a specific area on screen if playing on a mobile device). This chance to basically rewind the story if players regret their actions decreases the degree of difficulty on the gameplay level, as players are not punished for their mistakes but, on the narrative level, forms an inconsistency as it is at odds with *Arctictopia*'s implied call for polar environmental conservation, a field in which failure has severe consequences that cannot be easily undone.

Interspersed between the levels are fifteen unlockable cartoons (including the opening cutscene) that serve to introduce new gameplay mechanics and contribute to *Arctictopia*'s storytelling. Recurrent motifs in those cartoons are the polar bear mother's struggles to navigate a changing environment, as well as her multispecies alliances with other animals. On the diegetic level, all other animals (except for the fish in the introductory cutscene) are not represented as potential food sources (even though seals constitute a major component of polar bears' diets) but as allies that help the protagonists cope with their increasingly precarious circumstances. Here, *Arctictopia* playfully undermines the predator/prey binary that is still common in videogames (cf. Tyler 2022, 110) in favor of a vision of multispecies solidarity. Whether it is a snow fox comforting the crying polar bear cub (eleventh cartoon, unlocked after completing level 95) or several types of whales supporting the polar bear mother on her quest to reunite with her offspring (orcas in the fifth cartoon unlocked after level 25, narwhals in the twelfth cartoon after level 108 and Blue Whales in the fourteenth cartoon after level 139), *Arctictopia* represents relationships of mutual care as a desirable response to challenging circumstances, an impression that is further enhanced by the cute aesthetics of the game. Read through the lens of critical cuteness as advocated by Włodarczyk, the multispecies alliances represented in *Arctictopia* "hold the potential for bringing together cuteness and survival in a way that is not tongue-in-cheek, for the reason that brings together the two cute animal subjects is usually the experience of trauma, most often human-inflicted trauma" (2024, 5-6). The human-inflicted trauma that - in Włodarczyk's words - "haunts the visuals" (2024, 6) of *Arctictopia* is habitat loss in the Arctic due to anthropogenic climate change. The cooperation of our polar bear protagonists with seals, puffins, and whales is framed as a reaction to increasingly precarious environmental

conditions. Thus, *Arctictopia* represents a collaboration of diverse animals as expedient, but simultaneously points to the limits of individual action as the polar bears absolutely require the assistance of their peers to reunite. Whereas *Arctictopia* advocates for collaborative action in its narrative, this call for teamwork does not extend to the level of gameplay mechanics since it only offers a single-player mode. It should also be noted that all of the cartoons in *Arctictopia* are skippable, so watching them is entirely optional and at the discretion of the player.

Apart from endorsing multispecies alliances, *Arctictopia*'s cartoons also explicitly engage with questions of climate change and criticize environmental degradation. Multiple cartoons show the polar bear mother sweating and struggling to stay afloat among the melting ice. When she eventually falls into the sea in the tenth comic strip, the screen shows her underwater surrounded by trash, which, following the unlocking of that particular cartoon after level 75, also starts appearing as background decoration of the levels. Building on Soraya Murray's approach of what she calls "'background' reading, in which the focus moves from the [playable] characters themselves to the spaces within which they move" (2021, 14), I suggest that a close reading of the background decoration of *Artctictopia*'s levels can reveal the limits of a cozy aestheticization of the climate crisis.

While multiple types of waste appear, including glass bottles, wooden boxes, and metal tubs, I will focus on two particular items here that draw attention to specific problems connected to environmental pollution: discarded fishing nets and car tires. The fishing nets might be read as suggesting the dangers of overfishing and the threats to wildlife posed by so-called ghost nets (i.e., fishing nets that have been abandoned in the ocean). The car tires evoke the specter of petromodernity – a term coined by Stephanie Le Menager to make visible how much of "modern life [is] based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil" (2014, 67-68). Particularly in the context of the game's Arctic setting, the presence of petro-related trash might be read as a critique of the extractive activities of oil companies in the circumpolar North. Whereas most of *Arctictopia*'s comic strips only visualize the effects of the current climate crisis and refrain from identifying the origin of it, the fifteenth (and final) cartoon differs in this respect: It shows how the polar bear mother and cub are eventually reunited and once again hug happily, before the last panel of that comic strip features a long shot of the polar bears and their animal friends (including the seal, puffin, snow fox and multiple whales) staring into the sunset (their gaze directed away from the players) with a large ship-cum-factory featuring multiple smoking chimneys looming menacingly in the background. Here, *Arctictopia* locates the responsibility for environmental threats to the Arctic even more firmly within the human sphere (and links them to industrialization) than the earlier cartoon bemoaning marine pollution.

Speaking of humans: our species remains absent from *Arctictopia*'s visual level, except for a solitary human angler wearing Inuit-style snow goggles who appears as background decoration in every second level between 1 to 100. The game features two versions of this angler: first, as a man sitting in front of an igloo while wearing a fur hooded parka, trousers, mitts, and boots that look like traditional Inuit attire, as well as snow goggles that resemble the type of eyewear that has been used for centuries by Inuit communities to prevent snow blindness. Second, as someone holding his fishing rod into an ice hole while wearing contemporary clothing consisting of a warm cap, scarf, winter jacket, pants, mitts, and boots, as well as the same snow goggles as his other incarnation. While the angler's presence might be read as a laudable effort to acknowledge the Arctic's status as the rightful homeland of Inuit

communities, whose sustainable practices of being in the icescape (such as fishing) do not harm the polar environment (in contrast to the extractivist actions hinted at later in the game), the angler's appearance as an interchangeable passive part of the background decoration risks reducing the man's presence to an exoticized signifier of the Arctic setting (cf. Shafer 2024, 353) and might even reproduce racist stereotypes by misrepresenting Inuit people as passive and complacent. As such, one could consider *Arctictopia* to be an example of how "video games with Indigenous representations [that are produced without the involvement of Indigenous developers] often fall into stereotypes and/or appropriation" (LaPensée et al. 2021, 328). In this manner, *Arctictopia* both fails to acknowledge the increasing harm caused to Inuit communities by the climate crisis and obscures the multiple forms of environmental protection efforts undertaken by Inuit people, which include Sheila Watt-Cloutier's political activism, Zacharias Kunuk et al.'s 2010 documentary *Qapirangajuk: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, or Tanya Tagaq's songs like *Fracking*, to name just a few examples. It seems like the cozy atmosphere of *Arctictopia* can only be maintained by reducing its single representative of humanity to a cute, but passive piece of scenery.

Overall, its nostalgic, picture-book-like aesthetics, cheerful background music, and gameplay mechanics that are easy to learn, provide lenient punishment for failure, and allow for multiple play styles (including short play sessions) position *Arctictopia* as a cozy game (cf. Moran 2025, 44-45). Due to their generic features of "1) safety (stakes are low and there are no significant dangers in the game); 2) abundance (resources are not lacking, and no task is pressing or imminent); 3) softness (the aesthetics favours relaxation through displays of authenticity, sincerity and humanity)", cozy games have been framed "as an alternative to majoritarian designs emphasizing competition, speed, and violent and misogynistic themes" (Andiloro 2024, 80). There are ongoing scholarly discussions about cozy games with those seeing them "as media enabling players to imagine a better world and shift cultural attitudes in a politically progressive fashion" (Andiloro 2024, 80) and others (Andiloro himself, among them) criticizing that cozy games are still imbedded in capitalist systems turning them into "both a coping mechanism [for neoliberal pressures on individuals] and a reproducer of [capitalist] ideology" (Andiloro 2024, 89), a condition that Moran describes as "capitalist coziness" (2025, 44). Whereas *Arctictopia*'s gameplay mechanics and auditory (as well as, to a certain extent, visual) design unambiguously epitomize safety, abundance, and softness, its narrative of families torn apart repeatedly and adrift on melting ice floes puts a damper on the game's coziness.

CASUAL PLEASURES, UNACKNOWLEDGED SUFFERING

Arctictopia's level structure and straightforward gameplay mechanics turn it into a casual game that can easily be picked up for play sessions of five to ten minutes at a time. Although it is possible to complete the game in just one run (which, depending on the players' skills, would take anywhere between approximately two and seven hours), its repetitive structure makes this approach far less attractive for players than solving two or three levels at a time and picking up the game again at a later point. According to Jesper Juul, "[c]asual games [...] are games often of small scope that appeal to a broad audience and are easy to start playing. Casual games may be complex and deep, but the key is that they provide flexibility, allowing players to decide when and where to play, how often, and in what length of game sessions" (Juul 2019, 84). This flexibility can attract different types of audiences who do not want to or cannot accommodate the demands of video games that require an extensive

temporal commitment of their players (cf. Soderman 2017, 40). It has been criticized that those audiences are often imagined as female by game developers and that "[t]he game industry designs quick, casual games for women players because they are assumed to have only small bits of time to devote to leisure" (Kagen 2022, 73), thereby reproducing misogynist social expectations of women's reproductive labor. In fact, studies have shown that women and men engage in casual gaming in equal measure (cf. Eklund 2016, 26). Nevertheless, focusing on female casual gamers specifically can yield productive insights: Soderman explains how casual video games (analogously to cozy games as discussed in the previous section of this paper) eventually work to reinforce the status quo by providing a distracting coping mechanism from capitalist, patriarchal pressures "but simultaneously consum[ing] the time needed to think through how to transform the social conditions that create the anxieties […] in the first place" (2017, 47). In contrast to Soderman, Anable argues for considering the potential of playing casual games as resistance against ever-increasing demands on women's time to be always productive (often in the service of others) (2018, 96). This cursory overview shows how questions of intersectionality, particularly regarding the impact of gendered social expectations on players, figure prominently in the scholarly debate on casual video games.

Despite these studies on casual games and their audiences, the genre itself has long been marginalized within scholarly discourse (a notable exception is Jesper Juul's 2009 book *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and their Players*). Soderman attributes this lack of critical attention to a structural neglect of feminized mass media in a patriarchal society (cf. 2017, 53), whereas Leaver and Willson see "a level of cynicism about their design" as "inhibiting the acceptance of social, casual and mobile games" (2016, 3). The specific design features that Leaver and Willson refer to here concern the business model of many developers of casual games that often let players download their games for free and mainly generate profits through players' (optional) in-app purchases that may include in-game advantages and/or extra content (cf. Phillips 2016, 64). This strategy of motivating players to perform so-called microtransactions has been the subject of much criticism and is considered ethically problematic by some developers and scholars (cf. Phillips 2016, 65). Phillips further connects the apparent opposition between free-to-play casual games and those that require a one-time purchase but do not offer microtransactions to "a tension between business and art. Where games are seen as art, gameplay is lauded, moral integrity is valued, and there is a perception of an ongoing communicative relationship between producer and player. In comparison, when games are seen as a business commodity, monetization techniques are a priority, developers are thought of as unscrupulous and players are consumers to be milked for cash" (2016, 66). This supposed dichotomy, however, is destabilized by Phillips himself, as he points out "that even the most 'honourable' developer requires living costs" (2016, 67). *Arctictopia* is available as a one-time purchase at a comparatively low price point (4,49 € on Google Play Store, 4,99 € on Steam and Nintendo eShop, and 5,99 € on Apple App Store) and does not feature any microtransactions. Thus, the business model of *Arctictopia*'s developer Gamtropy at first glance seems more aligned with reputable buy-to-play games with artistic aspirations rather than less respected free-to-play games relying on players' in-app purchases.

It is not only Gamtropy's business model but also the studio's self-presentation that makes *Arctictopia* legible as an indie game. According to Jesper Juul, what turns a game into an indie game is its developer's "authenticity work", i.e., their attempts to stage themselves as authentic by claiming financial, aesthetic, and/or cultural

independence (Juul 2019, 130-131). When visiting Gamtropy's homepage, one is greeted by the slogan "Entropy measures system uncertainties; Gamtropy opens up game possibilities.", pasted on picture book-like art from their game *Subscribe to my Adventure* (Gamtropy 2020), followed by an overview of the studio's video games and a photo that shows Gamtropy's five team members and a text box describing their focus on games that concern environmental and social issues. This self-staging of the studio as a developer working with a small team showcases both their artistic aspirations through the displayed visuals as well as the magniloquent slogan and their (presumably) social mission. Gamtropy's full portfolio includes habitat restoration simulators *Desertopia* and *Forestopia* (despite the similarity in name, their gameplay differs strongly from *Arctictopia*), as well as the *Do you really want to know?*-duology of text adventures that addresses prejudices against HIV positive people, developed in cooperation with a charity. Gamtropy's portfolio thus emphasizes social issues as a central thematic concern for the studio. However, whether any game is recognized as an indie game does not only depend on its developer's self-presentation; according to Juul, "[i]nstitutions such as festivals, conferences, universities, and media channels reviewing games have been central to selecting, curating, and defining independent games" (2019, 61). In the case of Gamtropy, their aspirations towards recognition as an indie studio with a pro-social mission have been acknowledged by institutions such as the Taipei Game Show that has awarded a price specifically for indie games to the studio's game *Subscribe to my Adventure* (Gamtropy 2020) in 2020 or the Apple App Store that has chosen multiple games by the developer as "#EarthDay Game of the Day" and has presented Gamtropy with a "Cultural Impact" award for *Do you really want to know? 2* (Gamtropy 2024) in 2024.

This recognition also includes educational institutions: The Taiwanese National Tsing Hua University, where three of the studio's founders first met, has provided Gamtropy with a platform on their presence at the Taiwanese social media site *Dcard* to provide insights into their production processes (which simultaneously works to advertise their games). Here, using the medium of the video game to engage with the topic of anthropogenic climate change is presented as a deliberate decision by Gamtropy that aligns with the developers' emphasis on social concerns. In an interview prior to the release of *Arctictopia*, level designer Ren Chen explains that his primary motivation for setting the game in the Arctic was to draw attention to and warn against the consequences of anthropogenic climate change (National Tsing Hua University 2021). When adapting standard mechanics of puzzle games, Chen says that he was inspired by the natural conditions of the Arctic Ocean: For instance, the hunting behavior of actual orcas formed the basis of the game's employment of orcas as capable of moving ice floes (National Tsing Hua University 2021). Although the gameplay loop itself and the types of puzzles players solve are far from unique and found in countless comparable games, the Arctic setting was a conscious design choice and is an important part of how the developers market their game.

However, the casual mode of gameplay that *Arctictopia* encourages threatens to undermine the mediation of its ecological message. To learn more about the reception of *Arctictopia*, I will analyze reviews of the game published on digital games distributor *Steam* as well as in three online gaming journals, as part of the discourse on the game. While this approach can only provide an incomplete impression of the game's overall reception, it nevertheless makes visible how *Arctictopia*'s cozy aesthetics and casual mode of play stand in tension with its ecological theming. Despite certain key differences in its modes of production (i.e., game journalists are paid for writing reviews, and *Steam* users are providing them for free, gaming

journalists often receive free copies of games to test them, whereas *Steam* user usually buy the game etc.), I choose to discuss reviews of the game in online journals and on *Steam* alongside each other as their primary function is to help potential players decide on whether to buy the game or not. The response to *Arctictopia* has been overwhelmingly positive: All three journal reviews and thirty-one (out of thirty-three) user reviews on *Steam* recommend *Arctictopia,* highlighting its cute aesthetics, its fun gameplay mechanics, and the pleasant feelings they evoke. There is a common consensus that its art style makes *Arctictopia* stand out from comparable puzzle games and that its one hundred fifty levels provide good value for money. Most user reviews on *Steam* resemble the *World of Geek Stuff* review by Amanda Blain, who compares the game's "simple and cute" visuals to "a calming childhood story" and emphasizes its "very relaxing vibe" (Blain 2022). Blain also mentions that she likes to play *Arctictopia* to unwind "[a]fter a long day of working" (Blain 2022), a sentiment shared by *NintendoLink* writer Chelsea Beardsmore, who recommends *Arctictopia* as "a game that will soothe those who are tired of the harsh world" (Beardsmore 2022). These statements tie in with Andiloro's suggestion that "engaging in cozy play represents a temporary break allowing individuals to decompress before re-entering the cycle of production and consumption" (2024, 88). This desire to temporarily disengage from one's real-world problems by playing a casual puzzle game counteracts a more in-depth engagement with *Arctictopia*'s ecological themes.

Indeed, only five out of thirty-three *Arctictopia*'s user reviews on *Steam* and only one of the three journal reviews under consideration mention climate change explicitly, with one (negative) *Steam* review complaining that the game exaggerates the danger the climate crisis poses to polar bears specifically (even while appreciating the game's cute visuals) (cf. Jeong Deullae 2023). Other reviewers that comment explicitly on *Arctictopia*'s ecological messaging include *Indie Games Plus*' Joel Couture who remarks that *Arctictopia* is "delightfully adorable, which only makes its message of the disastrous effects of climate change on the habitat of these polar bears hit all the harder" and two *Steam* user reviews that read "Stop the ecocide" or proclaim that "There is no planet B" (Couture 2022; elyc 2023; kohi 2025). Such reviews show that the game's cozy aesthetics and casual gameplay do not necessarily blanket *Arctictopia*'s environmentalist agenda, though the scarcity of reviewers explicitly mentioning the climate crisis seems to confirm Andiloro's suggestion "that cozy games do not challenge the capitalist status quo, but rather act as an ideological *pressure relief valve* for life under capitalism" (Andiloro 2024, 80, emphasis in original). By transforming the climate crisis into a pleasant diversion, *Arctictopia* somewhat ironically becomes a tool that players can use to distract themselves from the same serious real-world problems that the game (or rather, its developer) intends to draw attention to.

Ultimately, my analysis of the wider implications of casual gameplay mechanics in *Arctictopia* and their reception by players cannot settle the question of whether the potential of casual games to provide a low-threshold access point to raise awareness for ecological problems outweighs the risk of them trivializing and commodifying the climate crisis. It does, however, make visible the fundamental tension at the heart of cozy, casual ecogames: The cozy eco-aesthetics that make them successful at reaching a broad audience (i.e., cute visuals and accessible, easily interruptible gameplay) simultaneously obscure the gravity of the real-world crisis it seeks to mobilize its players against. How this tension might be resolved remains the subject of a lively debate that also includes contributions by Alenda Chang (2024) or Holger Pötzsch (2024) that urge their readers to take the entanglement of a game's content with its

conditions of production, distribution, and the types of play it enables into account which is what this paper is attempting to do, albeit on a small scale.

CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF PLEASURE IN COZY ECOGAMES

My paper has shown how *Arctictopia* combines the generic affordances of both cozy and casual games with an explicit environmentalist message. Whereas its cute aesthetics at first glance seem to merely be designed to induce warm and fuzzy feelings of nostalgia in players, my analysis has uncovered the wider implications of *Arctictopia*'s specific representation of its animal protagonists and their polar environment. By employing the analytical lens of critical cuteness, my paper has revealed the underlying slow violence of anthropogenic climate change that hides in the shadow of *Arctictopia's* vision of multispecies solidarity. Postcolonial and ecocritical approaches have served to problematize stereotypical representations of Arctic environments and their inhabitants, and to point out how certain gameplay mechanics reaffirm an exploitative use of nature as a resource rather than calling a worldview that espouses such behavior into question. Simultaneously, my brief overview of user reviews has indicated how the game's cozy aesthetics and casual mode of gameplay might distract players from its environmentalist messaging and, hence, risk transforming the climate crisis into a pleasant commodity while obscuring the harm caused by it.

Arctictopia is not the only game utilizing what I have identified here as cozy eco-aesthetics. The physical board game *Rescue Polar Bears: Data & Temperature* (TWOPLUS, 2017), like *Arctictopia*, tells a story of polar bears endangered by climate change and represents the animals through small vaguely bear-shaped playing pieces, while offering a different attempt at addressing and working towards ameliorating their situation. In contrast to the player-centric self-empowerment fantasy of *Arctictopia*, the gameplay loop of *Rescue Polar Bears* has players move research vessels across the board to collect data and, if necessary, transport polar bears whose ice floes have melted to safety. Players win the game once they have collected enough data points, and lose if the temperature rises too high and/or they let polar bears die. Whereas *Arctictopia* focuses on individual action and cute anthropomorphized animal protagonists, *Rescue Polar Bears* emphasizes the value of player collaboration on the gameplay level and features a narrative that stresses the importance of scientific research instead. While in both games, the players' success is a result of their strategic thinking and careful planning, *Rescue Polar Bears* imbues the players' task with a stronger sense of urgency compared to the relaxed, self-determined pace of *Arctictopia*. Thus, both games exemplify how cozy eco-aesthetics can be implemented in game design in different ways, encouraging different forms of affective investment. Coming back to the conference theme of "Intersectional Pleasures", my paper hopes to inspire more conversations about whose pleasure is at the center of cozy (eco)games and whose concerns remain out of view.

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ENDNOTES

[1] While the polar bears are not explicitly gendered in-game, the game’s description of *Arctictopia* on its digital points of sale (including *Steam*, Apple’s *App Store*, Google’s *Play Store,* as well as Nintendo’s *eShop*) refers to the adult polar bear as “mama”.