

Killing them Softly: Exploring the Contradictory Pleasures of Cosy Detective Videogames

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Led in the box office by Kenneth Branagh's lavishly budgeted Agatha Christie adaptations and in the bookshop by Richard Osman's *Thursday Murder Club* (2020-), detective fiction seems to be enjoying an unparalleled popular culture renaissance that shows no signs of slowing. Recognising an urgent need to shine a scholarly spotlight on this often overlooked and under-appreciated genre, our forthcoming book *Crime Does Play: The Detective Genre and its Videogame Adaptations* contribute to a growing scholarly interest in detective videogames (Okabe, 2019; Larsen and Schoenau-Fog, 2020; Fernández-Vara, 2021; Ramos, 2021).

But the popularity of Osman, as well as long running TV dramas like *Death in Paradise* (Thorogood, 2011-) and *Father Brown* (Flowerday and Guner, 2013-), demonstrates the appeal of a particular style of crime fiction: 'cozy crime'. Speaking to the theme of the conference we will be considering both the narratological and ludic pleasures of cozy crime and its potentially awkward intersection with cozy games, considering what is gained or lost in this process of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000). Ultimately we point out the many of the paradoxes of the pairing of cozy games and cozy crime, asking if what genre historian Julian Symons (1972) refers to as 'bloody murder' can ever be the cosy bed fellow of Animal Crossing's Tom Nook?

We believe that looking at the curious mixture of cozy crime and cozy games can help inform emerging scholarship tackling the value and aesthetics of cozy gaming (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020; Gunderman, 2024) the unprecedented rise of which is now seemingly challenging the privileged status of games in genres aimed at more conventional or hardcore game audiences (Carpenter, 2025). Such games are doubly complex, seemingly offering contradictory aesthetic pleasures of relaxation in a traditionally high-octane medium and paradoxically comforting thematic and narrative material built around some of worst aspects of criminality – premeditated murder. These seeming paradoxes make cozy crime videogames worthy of attention

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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as peculiar edge cases, but we believe an interrogation of this double-edged cozy format will reveal ideas that are potentially useful to emerging scholarship around both cozy games and cozy crime fiction as genres.

Emerging in the late twentieth century, it has been argued that cozy crime literature is a reaction to the violent and dark themes of the hardboiled novel (Ramazan 2021) or the psychological and sociological realism of police procedurals which dominated crime fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century (Valverde 2010; Reiner 2010). It follows the tendencies of golden age detective fiction not only in its evocation of puzzle-clue based plots and country house settings but has a breezy light-heartedness in both aesthetics and narrative; a deliberate sidelining of grotesque elements; a penchant for humour; and a final conformity to moral and social values.

One of the earliest and most influential attempts to pin down the definition of cozy in the context of games is that of Project Horseshoe (Short *et al.*, 2017). So influential is their report that almost a decade later Nicole Carpenter turned to it in her *Guardian* article, eloquently summarising their position thus:

The group zeroed in on three core things: safety, abundance, and softness. Cozy games (cozy in US spelling) don't have high-risk scenarios: "There is no impending loss of threat," they wrote. They must have a sense of abundance: "Nothing is lacking, pressing or imminent." And a soft aesthetic wraps everything up like a warm hug. (Carpenter, 2025)

Although its usage as a buzzword is a fairly recent development, the roots of cozy gaming can be traced back to the growth of social and casual gaming trends of the first decade of the twenty-first century deemed "the casual revolution" by Jesper Juul (2012) and the emergence of new female audiences around them. Despite a flurry of scholarship emerging to study this culturally significant movement (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020; Gunderman, 2024), cozy gaming has proved challenging to define and inconsistently applied. Boudreau, Consalvo and Phelps (2025) have observed that it is often a feeling or vibe rather than a firmly delineated genre and Waszkiewicz agrees, observing that "despite the vast range of genres and themes found under the cozy games label, we usually can tell which game is cozy just by looking at it" (2024).

Even though they were considered far from cosy at the time, the works of Agatha Christie and G.K. Chesterton, both pioneers of the golden age of detective fiction (and founding members of the famous British Detection Club), have seemingly become the template for cosy crime. Consequently, adaptations of Poirot from the French studio Microïds carry the cosy torch into games most clearly and will be the core case study here, alongside the Japanese FMV (Full Motion Video) game *The Centennial Case: A Shijima Story* (Square Enix, 2023). Whilst these games guide the player to reconstruct the crime through a step-by-step visualisation, turning deduction into a cosy jigsaw; games like *The Curse of the Golden Idol* (Color Grey Games, 2022) are more overtly complex and open in both their themes and the intellectual challenge of the puzzles.

Like the player of a videogame, detective fiction requires the player to be fully cognisant of the rules of the game and in a position of agency, so they are able to play along. Such works were often centred on the idea of fair play - insisting that the mystery should never be solved through a detective's intuition, or through accidental or supernatural means, and that each clue should be clearly presented for the reader's

scrutiny. Larsen and Schoenau-Fog (2020) have criticised typical detective game adaptations for casting the player as a bumbling Watson rather than the detective themselves, a claim that seems to be truer of such cosy game adaptations.

Cosy crime has an escapist quality and historian of the genre, Martin Edwards, points out that the golden age of detective fiction emerged at a time where Britain was experiencing a kind of 'play fever' in which "games offered escape from the horrors of war time as well as from the bleak realities of peace" (2017, p. 7). But there has always been a darker thread to detective fiction, even in its most traditional format, which problematises the cosy moniker. In her sociological study of early twentieth century Japanese detective fiction, Sari Kawana argues:

As long as someone somewhere is haunted by the past, uncertain about the present, and anxious about the future, detective fiction will plumb the murky depths of the modern experience. (Kawana, 2008, p. 224)

Rather than escapism, Kawana reminds us that detective fiction can address more philosophical ideas related to the human condition. Meanwhile, Clara Fernandez-Vara (2021) has observed the postmodernist trappings of detective videogames, so perhaps detective fiction in the digital medium is as capable of speaking to our postmodern condition as Kawana argued that detective fiction in literature spoke to twentieth century modernity. Concerned as it is with truth and rationality, the genre can help us see reason in a world that suddenly seems to have none, allows us to put a series of chaotic events in a sensible order, and arms us with the hope that justice (whatever that may actually be) can sometimes be done.

We have been thinking about cosy crime videogames from a formalist and pragmatic position. We argue that both are essential to understanding the genre. Using pragmatic analysis, as proposed by film genre theorist Rick Altman (1999), we can investigate the uses of such texts in communities of play, which ultimately demonstrates the subjective and situated nature of cosiness itself. Ultimately, we argue whether a game is 'cosy crime' is not simply a question relating to its construction, style, and form, but what the player brings to, and needs from, the game; in this context, coziness must be, in part, anticipated, rather than wholly prescriptive.

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