

Cursed Coziness: Cursed Mechanics in Dark Cozy Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Benevolent Leader, please don't judge me, but... I've always wanted to eat a meal made of poop! Will you help me satisfy this dark desire?” - Cult of the Lamb (Massive Monster 2022).

This excerpt of *Cult of the Lamb* (2022) initiates a choice for the player: either they can grant their follower their wish to eat poop, or deny it. The requests of the followers can escalate all the way where they present themselves as willing sacrificial lambs (quite literally), all the while the game aesthetics remain “soft”, a characteristic often associated with cozy games (Short et al. 2018). Subsequently, *Cult of the Lamb* has been used to expand the understanding of ‘cozy games’ (Bódi and Thon 2025), and even to coin a new category within cozy games that “partially reject the expectation of ludic safety” (Waszkiewicz 2024), known as “dark cozy games”. Building on that scholarship, our research focuses on the mechanics in *Cult of the Lamb*, as that allows us to further explore the tension between the “soft” and the dark story-values and affordances of the game, specifically in relation to the cult-related mechanics. In this contribution, we propose the concept of “cursed” as a useful analytical tool to approach this tension, and pose that the coziness carries, normalizes, and enables amplification of the cursed.

For this paper we analyze several cult-mechanics from the base game and from the additional content; *Sinful Pack* (Massive Monster 2024). We use a close playing approach (Lammes 2003) with the cursed as our analytical lens in order to map and analyse the cult related game mechanics. The game and its extension include mechanics that can be traced back to several behaviours and actions found in real

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life cults, remediated in other popular media such as documentaries, like Netflix' "Wild Wild Country" (Way and Way 2018) and podcasts, like "American Panic" (Marchesi and Shattuck 2020). These actions frame the game's cult-mechanics, such as brainwashing followers with hallucinatory mushrooms, foregoing followers' sleep in order for them to work, or declaring extended fasts. Seeing as *Cult of the Lamb* is seemingly expanding conceptualizations of what a cozy game can be (Bódi and Thon 2025; Waszkiewicz 2024), showing how it features liminality makes it a compelling case study for analysis.

The term cursed can oftentimes be found in online discourse, evident from Reddit threads and in regards to memes. As of yet it does not exist as an academic concept, but it can serve as a vehicle to open up a reframing of game mechanics, especially in dark cozy games. The term 'cursed' can be interpreted in a variety of ways, in the literal way as something that inflicts harm, an evil mark left by uttering words, as well as something that is strange in an uncomfortable way, or an evil haunting that traumatizes you. Or, in a 'chronically online' context, as the "idea that having to think about the thing feels like a curse on your mind" (Reddit 2023). The cursed therefore has overlap with the concept of transgression, explored by Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020) in relation to game content, as both cross cultural or social boundaries. In our conceptualization of the cursed as a mechanic, we also focus on transgressive game content instead of transgressive play practices, the latter being one of the main approaches in studies on play and transgression (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). While there is thus no set definition of the cursed, we conceive of the cursed as carrying concepts of social transgression, a disorienting reaction to discrepancies of perception between original context of an object and a new seemingly unfitting context, and aspects of problematized morality.

When applying the cursed as an analytical tool to the cult-related game mechanics of *Cult of the Lamb*, it can dissect the ways in which the cozy operates, demonstrating how it carries and amplifies "dark" elements. In the abovementioned example where the follower asks the cult leader to eat poop, the mechanics operationalize the socially transgressive. Additionally, the mirrored real-life cult context expressed in cutesy aesthetics and performed through mechanics, conjures a build-up of moral ambiguity that gets amplified mechanically, by the player acting as leader with all-encompassing command over their followers. When the player fulfills their followers request, the followers' loyalty —an important resource in the game— increases, even though they might get sick. If the player refuses the request, the player receives a penalty of general loyalty loss. The player has no option to opt out of the decision, forcing them to make a choice. The mechanics allow the player to view the followers as resources to be managed, while humanizing them is an optional and conscious decision.

Moreover, reading the "prank" quest line as cursed, shows how the game allows a succession of problematic morality, as follower requests ramp up from eating poop, to throwing them in medieval stalks, to eventual murder and sacrifices. By

approaching the cursed as an analytical tool to mechanics in this quest line, it helps us to analyze how the juxtaposition between cursed mechanics and cozy aesthetics open up a morally ambiguous realm of affordances for the player. Simultaneously, the tension between the cursed and the cozy allows players to explore more transgressive aspects of cult dynamics. As argued by Simon Estok, the seemingly paradoxical opposites provide a perverse sensation of enthrallment and fascination, transforming tension into pleasure (2021). By framing the mechanics within a “soft” and “safe” space, *Cult of Lamb* enables players to engage with normally heavy themes of power, control, and exploitation, offering an experimental playground where players can engage with “evil”, transgression, and morality.

With this paper we aim to take the first steps towards expanding the analytical toolkit with which to study “dark cozy games”. Which hopefully leads to a more in-depth understanding of mechanics as the conveyor of the liminality between darkness and the cozy. Moreover, this points towards the merits of further scholarship on the role of coziness in games, producing a better understanding of the growing cozy games genre.

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