

Cultivating History: Gender, Power, and Reflection in Cozy Botanical Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Figure out the ideal habitat of forgotten flora” and “nurture the Abbess' garden” are two excerpts that feature in the promotional texts of the respective recent cozy botany-themed games *Botany Manor* (Balloon Studios 2024) and *The Abbess Garden Demo* (MD Studio 2025). These descriptions and the games’ main mechanics fall in line with characteristics usually encountered in cozy games: safety, abundance, and softness (Short et al. 2018). Both games also feature historical settings, which typically encompass themes of (male) violence (Serrano Lozano 2020; Wright 2022), annexation (Holdenried and Trépanier 2013; Chapman 2016), a “March of Progress” narrative (Fogu 2009; Houghton 2024), and historically inspired gendered limitations (Orellana Figueroa 2022; Barba-Alonso and Ortega-Sánchez 2024). Through textual analysis of the abovementioned games, this paper explores what happens to representation of historical realities when the prioritisation of ludic, narrative, and visual safety (Waszkiewicz 2024) renders the past cozy. By centering female protagonists tending to plants in two different historical contexts (Victorian England and Grand Siècle France), these games are fruitful case studies to better understand how videogames mediate the pleasures of cultivating nature in the past, exploring intersecting themes of gender, science, and harm.

Botany Manor and *The Abbess Garden* feature core mechanics that link affect to care and observation of plants: players nurture, examine, and discover plants while gathering botanical knowledge, encouraging slow, attentive engagement with the gameworld. This emphasis on the “vegetal,” common in cozy games (Pinder 2024), reflects their affective design, inviting players to “nurture, care, and tend to” (Bódi

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2024, 58). In Vandewalle's (2025) work on conceptualizing historical cozy games, he foregrounds elements of "a cozy mode of historical games" that feature elements such as "nature", "collectives" and "non-photorealist aesthetics", which elements are present in our case study games as well. He also notes an absence of specific timeframe and "a complete or potential absence of violence". *Botany Manor* and *The Abbess' Garden* offer expansions on this initial framework, as these games do incorporate specific historical settings and both titles embed narratives of power, politics, and harm. They acknowledge historical structures of inequality and danger but displace these into text and dialogue rather than gameplay. In *Botany Manor*, players assume the role of Arabella Greene, a botanist whose career was constrained by institutional sexism, revealed through letters, instead of direct playable obstacles. Similarly, *The Abbess Garden* hints at threats to the abbey under a new king, conveyed through conversation rather than active manageable peril. This design allows players to inhabit historically informed worlds without experiencing danger firsthand. As such, this paper argues that it is not just plants players tend to and cultivate in these games, it is also the historical imaginary, harnessing cozy games' potential to contribute to a "new mode of doing history in games" (Vandewalle 2025, 2).

Botany has long occupied a liminal space between science and domesticity. Men's plant classification was framed as "science", while women's botanical illustrations and knowledge were dismissed as "hobby", "art", or "domestic labour" (Shteir 1996; Sagal 2022). As such, botany naturally draws attention to historically gendered power dynamics, which these games recreate mechanically (by focusing on care as feminine labour) and representationally (male non-player characters often are dismissive and threatening). Sullivan et al. (2020) demonstrate that gendered power dynamics extend into game mechanics themselves, where crafting mechanics become linked to the feminized, domestic, and leisure. We argue that similar influences are in effect in the realm of ludic botanical care. Additionally, the masculine scientific authority that historically dismissed women's botanical labour also intersects with the colonial authority in botanical classification. As Minnen and Kagen (2025) argue, the labeling and collecting of knowledge of plants emerge from colonial taxonomies that impose order on the natural world. The catalogues are present in both games and function as systems of classification that establish mechanisms of knowledge, contributing to a feeling of control that strengthens the "cozy" orderly atmosphere these titles cultivate. This paper analyses how the games' classification and care-based mechanics build scientific knowledge, and how these knowledge practices remain entangled with the gendered and colonial histories that shaped botany.

The cozy gameplay design transforms these sites of historical injustice into cozy spaces for exploration. History becomes a curated archive of harm, inciting players to interact with it indirectly through letters, books, and conversations. Additionally, the games allow players to voluntarily engage critically with how knowledge was produced, gendered and policed. This paper argues that *Botany Manor* and *The Abbess Garden* challenge conventional notions of historical games, suggesting that

the comfort and care embedded in cozy game design can provide new ways of experiencing and critically reflecting on the past, allowing players to indirectly, yet meaningfully, explore historical injustice. As such, its audience is scholars interested in the intersection of game studies, game design, environmental humanities, and history.

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