

# My Cozy Hero: How Cozy Games Challenge Conventional Hero Dynamics

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## INTRODUCTION

Challenging the paradigm that small, noncompetitive, softly themed games can't be 'real,' i.e. legitimate (Consalvo and Paul, 2019), cozy games have exploded in popularity in the last several years. Research about them has likewise followed suit, as researchers have studied their gameplay (Wappling et al., 2022), aesthetics (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020), usefulness as self-care for players (Waszkiewicz and Tyimińska, 2024), and their role in supporting neoliberal paradigms (Bódi, 2024), among other topics. But even though many such games feature a main character/avatar that the player controls and exerts agency through, there has not (yet) been any systematic study of the role of the hero in cozy games, and how such games could potentially subvert – or rewrite – the traditional hero paradigm for videogames.

Cozy games have emerged as a significant alternative to dominant heroic paradigms in digital games, shifting emphasis away from combat, conquest, and empowerment toward aesthetics and practices of care, gentleness, and relational support. Sicart argues, players rarely approach dilemmas in games with abstract ethical commitments; instead, they rely on "player logic," a culturally situated interpretive frame shaped by prior gameplay experiences and broader social values (Sicart, 2009, pp. 65–89). This paper adopts Sicart's perspective to interrogate how cozy games

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construct a new form of heroism that reorients player logic toward compassion, mutuality, and acceptance rather than mastery or dominance.

Drawing from a collaborative research project on cozy game design (Consalvo, Phelps, & Boudreau, 2025), this work situates coziness as both an aesthetic and ethical stance. Project Horseshoe’s influential definition describes cozy games as evoking “the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness” (Project Horseshoe, 2017), operationalized through mechanics such as tidying, fishing, collecting, and craftwork; warm low-contrast visuals; diegetic ambient audio; and narratives centered around home, family, and emotional wellbeing. These design strategies challenge players to recalibrate their expectations of agency: threats are minimized, progression systems rarely emphasize power accumulation, and the player’s value is determined not by conquest but by the ability to nurture, comfort, and sustain others.

To illustrate these shifts in heroic framing, the paper offers close analyses of the central characters/heroes in three recent games: *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020), *Wanderstop* (Ivy Road, 2025) and *Sips and Sonnets* (Blue Tango Street, 2025). These games break from the world-saving, hero’s journey narratives of mainstream AAA games to instead offer the player the ability to engage in small-scale acts of kindness, share as well as gain memories with other characters, and focus on emotions and healing rather than power and destruction.

In *Spiritfarer*, lead character Stella takes over the role of Charon, accompanying and ferrying spirits through the final stages of life, and onwards to the next realm. Her form of agency, or heroism, is enacted through hugging, listening, building spaces for comfort, and emotionally supporting characters such as Summer, Alice, Astrid, and Gustav—each confronting death, regret, or decline. Stella’s journey culminates in the acceptance of her own mortality, emphasizing care, vulnerability, and non-transactional giving.

*Wanderstop* interrogates traditional heroic narratives through its slow, contemplative gameplay about fighter Alta, who has been forced to take a break from battle because she is so tired she literally cannot hold her sword anymore. After collapsing in the forest she is rescued by Boro, who invites her to run his tea shop while she recovers. Despite relying on the ‘reluctant hero’ trope, the game inverts the story, slowly showing Alta the value of slowing down sometimes, taking breaks, and avoiding excessive worry about other people’s problems.

Similarly, in *Sips and Sonnets* retired journalist Matilda runs another teahouse, where she engages in conversations with patrons, while anxiously awaiting an old friend’s visit, and deals with (or rather tries to ignore) her own mental decline. The game’s visual novel style models a form of heroism that centers age-related wisdom, expressed via deep conversation with her patrons, recollection of past triumphs and losses, and mentorship. Matilda’s skills, and the game’s interaction options, are tied to (failing) memory, emotional intelligence rather than physical or ludic prowess, and a narrative that foregrounds aging and cognitive decline rather than triumphant mastery.

These case studies reveal that cozy games expand the cultural repertoire of playable heroism by centering protagonists who are older, frailer, and less agential in traditional ludic terms. The help they provide to others does not yield gameplay

advantages—no stat boosts, no upgraded powers—but is meaningful precisely because it is transformative rather than transactional. Cozy heroism offers a challenge to both design conventions and longstanding genre expectations, offering a vision of play in which subjectivity develops not through victory over adversity but through sustained relational engagement.

Ultimately, this paper argues that cozy heroes invite players to imagine a new ethical orientation within games, pushing beyond conventional power fantasies and highlighting alternative models of leadership, care, and community. Such reconfigurations of player logic open new pathways for understanding how games shape moral imagination and broaden the possibilities for who—and what—a hero can be.

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