A contextual study of

video games in

work and pleasure

Report Contents:

Report secondary focus:

Do cozy/relaxing games exist, and what elements define the subjective genre?

Introduction and report aims:

This report will be focused on analyzing the usage of cozy/relaxing games in the context of pleasure within gaming culture. As a secondary aim the report will explore whether the cozy genre exists within the wider gaming culture, analyzing the elements that create a cozy game and what differentiates them from "traditional games" as particularly relaxing/comforting. In conjunction with the secondary aim this report will also be illustrating the loose definitional nature of the cozy genre and the elements/traits that create it leading to the genre being the most subjective to date within gaming media.

Methods of analysis used:

For this report most of the research derives from online sources such as Google Scholar, game development articles and recognized governmental/professional medical articles. Furthermore, the report includes several studies/theories found within online publications of books focused on the topic of psychology to support my report and its findings. All sources used throughout the report can be located in the Appendix subcategory.

Findings:

Before exploring the rising popularity of cozy games and the eventual question of whether the ambiguous genre exists it is first imperative that the report defines what is meant by the term cozy game [1]. Cozy video games are defined by *"how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness"* [2] but also as a *"space to deal with emotional and social maintenance and growth" [36].* A fundamental theme that creates the cozy genre is the ability to provide a convincing escapism for the player to sink into, one that notably has stress, peril and crushing responsibility absent from its gameplay loop. Games like Animal Crossing New Horizons and Stardew Valley are two of the popular examples displaying what the cozy genre typically looks and plays like. The cozy genre could be compared to that of the casual game genre but rather than providing short form gameplay cozy games prefer long form gameplay loops with both an intrinsic and extrinsic focus on relaxing gameplay elements such as music, aesthetics, atmosphere, and mechanics. For instance, Subway Surfers is a casual short form mobile game tempting players with bursts of arcade survival gameplay and an emphasis on "non cozy" mechanics and aesthetics, rather than relaxing the player Subway Surfers relies on high intensity stimuli and the threat of failure to keep its players engaged. In contrast, Animal Crossing New Horizons is an example of a cozy game, preferring to spread its gameplay loop and rewards in a long form manner watching players turn a deserted island into a lively yet isolated neighborhood across many hours, there is a greater emphasis on cozy aesthetics, lack of threats, simple mechanics and intrinsic accomplishment. Cozy games have become increasingly popular with recent additions to the genre and world events playing a significant role. The COVID 19 pandemic increased gaming habits within both non-gamers and gamers. The graphs below illustrates this increase across a sample of 781 respondents of all ages and backgrounds:
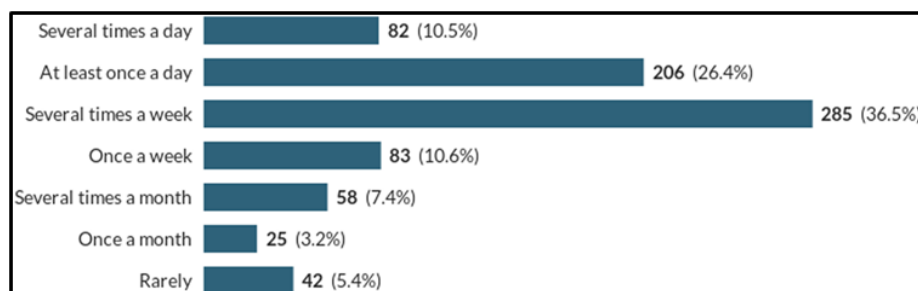
Figure 1: *The graph above shows how often respondents played video games pre lockdown/pandemic* [3]
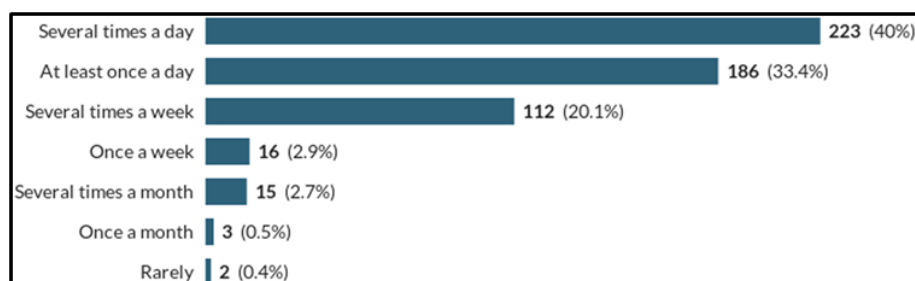
Figure 2: *The graph above shows the gameplay habits of those same respondents during and post lockdown* [4]

According to the graphs there was a major (30%) increase in those who play *"several times a day"*. Many respondents reported a change in the types of games they play, due to the adverse nature of the pandemic and its effect on overall mental wellbeing many turned to *"games with mostly non-fighting mechanics"* [5]. Across the many respondents and the wider gaming culture Animal Crossing New Horizons was commonly cited as the game players resorted to, enticing the world with its cozy atmosphere and relaxing mechanics. Animal Crossing New Horizons came out on March 20th, 2020, [6] just as lockdown began. It comes as no surprise that during such a difficult period 22.4 million players (in the first four months of release) [7] turned to Animal Crossing for a sense of escapism and leisure. Referring to the research questionnaire one respondent remarked *"since COVID I have been playing Animal Crossing nearly every day. Almost ALL DAY in the beginning and now just a few hours in the mornings" [8]*. Another beloved staple of the genre, Stardew Valley, boasts high player counts with an all-time peak of 94,479 concurrent players and a 24-hour peak of 36,941 *[9]* at the time of drafting this report (16th February 2024) via the game distributor service "Steam" alone. It is clear to see how influential and critical to the gaming landscape the cozy genre has become, despite its ambiguous genre borders. The next section of the report will be an analysis of the elements that make up the genre and how they fabricate a believably serene and ultimately escapist digital reality.

Cozy games are defined by four key elements that work in tandem to create a relaxing experience. These elements are:

·   Lack of peril/threats,

·   Simple and social mechanics,

·   Music

·   Cozy aesthetics.

This section of the report will be dedicated to defining these elements and how they create the desired cozy/relaxing feeling within players. The primary element is the lack of peril/threats encountered within both the game world and gameplay objectives. The removal of danger is the foundational genre defining element differentiating cozy games from "traditional" games. Cozy games feature *"an absence of danger and risk" [15]* with gameplay objectives having *"no impending loss or threat" [16]*. This departure from perilous gameplay creates a world where *"players don't need to worry about the high stress, immediate trials of mere survival and can instead put their attention towards the delicate work of becoming a better person"* [10]. Peril refers to any danger within the video game which includes both external perils like enemies but also internal perils like starvation. Worries like these are notably absent from games like Animal Crossing New Horizons presenting players with a sense of relaxation because *"any sense of impending danger triggers biological responses in the player. Their sympathetic nervous system kicks, adrenaline floods the body, and memory suffers"* [11]. The reduced danger and subsequent anxiety prevents players from suffering a decrease in performance related effectiveness and efficiency, keeping the central executive of their working memory clear [12] in turn allowing the player to slip into the meditative flow state [13], thus blocking out any stressors' players feel by calming the amygdala section of

the brain [14]. Another major element that contributes to the cozy game experience is the simplistic and social gameplay mechanics. Cozy games rely on simplistic, familiar, and low stimuli mechanics to keep the player relaxed. The familiar nature of many mechanics/objectives ensures that players understand exactly what they need to do eliminating the stress caused by learning something new and the subsequent inefficiency players may feel. Simple tasks like cleaning a room, watering plants, and picking fruit are common examples.

Figure 3: *Image above shows an Animal Crossing player watering plants* [17]

Not only do cozy games place an emphasis on familiar activities, but there is also a mechanical focus on sociability. Players are encouraged to interact with NPCs (non-Player Characters) across the game world for tips, quests, and rewards. Cozy games understand that players are *"social creatures"* [18], they *"strive to be part of a group, and to be accepted"* [19]. However, adequate sociability can be difficult to achieve in the real world, therefore, cozy games are designed to only include positive and low risk social interactions between the player and the characters. Preventing the player from becoming stressed by the pressure of interactions all the while fulfilling their social instincts, producing an impression of belonging in the game world that they may not feel outside of it. Alongside the previously mentioned aspects, many mechanics/objectives are optional, giving players the freedom to do anything. This freedom in turn prevents the player from feeling a sense of responsibility or discomfort, two internalizations that negate coziness. Music is another element which cozy games rely on heavily to create a leisurely environment. Typically, music (such as 11PM [39]) is ambient, slow, and predictable. The tranquil environments of many cozy games are reinforced by the music being equally tranquil, supporting the game's atmosphere and the relaxation it is trying to provoke out of the player. The slow ambient nature of the music forces the flow state onto players by providing another medium for them to be distracted by much like the non-threatening nature of the genre stated prior; music helps shut down the amygdala and calm the player [20]. The final element covered in this section is cozy aesthetics. Arguably the most recognizable cozy element to many unsurprisingly plays a leading role in establishing a safe atmosphere and tone. There is a plethora of ways designers can create a cozy feeling through aesthetics, one such instance being through mundanity. The mundane appearance of a sitting room, library or bedroom are *"familiar and*

knowable setting[s] or place[s]" [21] which *"will be cozier than the unfamiliar, alien, exotic, or fantastical"* [22]. An unfamiliar setting puts the player on edge as they attempt to figure out whether the area is safe, if the area is unfamiliar, they will feel a sense of agoraphobia and alertness and so preventing relaxation. Focus can also be used to create coziness. *"Elimination of interruptions, pressures, or sources of unwanted distraction, allows the player to feel a place is knowable and thereby becomes familiar and comfortable"* [24]. This focus effect can be achieved through *"intimate framing" [25]* forcing players into a secluded environment via the camera positioning can prevent distractions whilst also developing a pleasantly isolating atmosphere. One such example of this is the house environments from early The Legend of Zelda games.

Figure 4: The inside of Link's house from The Legend of Zelda a Link to the Past creates a cozy aesthetic through its use of focus framing, mundane environment design and warm colors [26]

A final way to create and maintain cozy aesthetics is to manufacture a sense of refuge in the player. Having an external environment appear harsher both thematically and artistically leads to players being naturally more relaxed in an environment that contrasts with the dangerous one, this can be achieved through theming, for example *"shelters from storms"* [23] or through the use of color, for instance using warmer colors in the inside of a tavern and colder, darker colors on the outside world. However, all elements discussed can be observed in games not considered cozy by the wider gaming populace. The next section of the report will explore how cozy elements are used in non-cozy games and how this leads to "pockets of coziness" conjunctively answering the question of whether the cozy genre exists.

Coziness is a subjective feeling, affecting different people at contrasting times, it comes as no surprise that a genre named after such a feeling is also extremely subjective. Whilst games like Stardew Valley attempt and mostly succeed in providing a digital haven harboring player relaxation, they also fail in some areas causing feelings of stress over pleasure. A major example of this is the timer in Stardew Valley. The timer places restrictions and urgency onto players, forcing them to play at a faster pace to ensure adequate productivity in the 14-minute [27] days before the player's character is forced to sleep. The addition of a timer acts as a stressor, leading to an increase in the anxiety players may feel. This increase in anxiety directly affects the central executive of their working memory by introducing task

irrelevant stimuli whether they be external (distractions), or internal (worrisome thoughts) [28]. Anxious thinking decreases a person's efficiency and effectiveness drastically, which is only made worse by the ever-present pressure of the timer [29]. As a result, some fail to feel relaxed by Stardew Valley, which instead leads to an uncomfortable experience. The previously explained experience ushers in the question, if relaxing games can also be stress-inducing, can traditionally non-cozy games also be considered cozy? There are many cozy elements that can be observed within traditional and stress inducing video games, one such example being the Dark Souls series. Dark Souls is commonly referred to as *"punishing, cruel, sadistic, and uncompromising"* [30] with its extortionately difficult enemies solidifying its reputation as a game people do not play for relaxation. However, there are numerous cozy elements within Dark Souls establishing a "cozy pocket" in the otherwise solemn experience. The primary element that Dark Souls uses is refuge environments. Fire link Shrine is a safe haven for players, ensuring there is no *"immediate danger"* [31], the adversity of the "outside world" and Fire link's contrast provides *"a moment of safety [in] an otherwise intense and dangerous game"* [32]. Not only does Fire link employ this cozy factor it uses many others to create an environment that starkly contrasts that of the outside world and relaxes players. Fire link uses warm colors around the central bonfire to establish a tranquil atmosphere. This atmosphere is aided by *"the crackling of the fire [and] the lessening or elimination of intense sounds"* [33] additionally the soothing Firelink shrine theme [37] in the background differs from the high intensity music played during boss battle segments. Furthermore, Fire link contains social mechanics, encouraging players to speak to the many characters found in the refuge for tasks (albeit ambiguously assigned), trading but more so than anything else for a sense of companionship. The NPC's scattered in Fire link are in the same broken world the player finds themself, yet again through the adversity of the "outside world" Fire link develops a convincing refuge not only in the environment itself but also in the shared experiences of the NPC's leaving the player with an impression of belonging.


Figure 5: *The image above displays Fire link Shrine from Dark Souls* [34]

Another game which employs cozy elements well is The Legend of Zelda Breath of the Wild (BOTW). Freedom and exploration are two of the core pillars providing BOTW with its foundation. These two elements are also heavily present in cozy games, players are given the freedom in both games to do whatever they feel at any time ensuring that a sense of responsibility, time pressure and task unwillingness is not felt during gameplay. BOTW provides players with an expansive game world which makes use of washed out yet equally

vibrant colors to convey a sense of relaxation. The colors are not so vibrant that the player reacts to the high intensity stimuli, but they are also not dull enough to create a depressing atmosphere. BOTW's use of color is calming and passive.
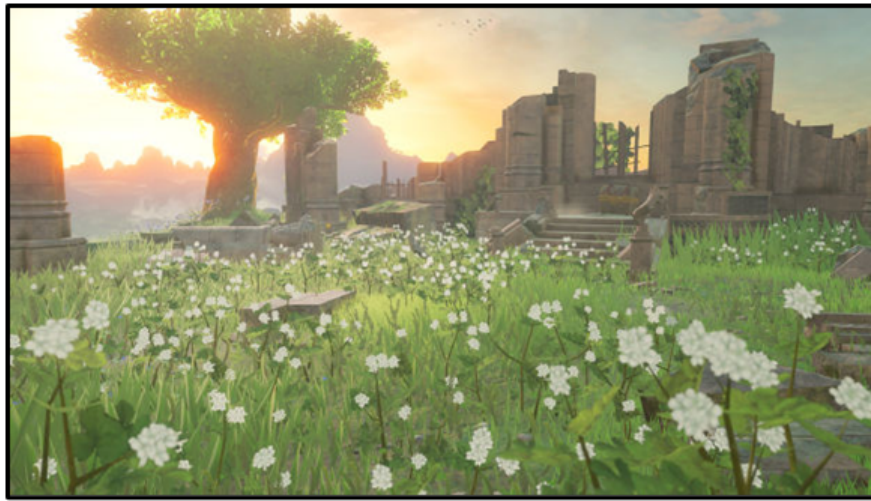
Figure 6: Image above is a screenshot from BOTW highlighting the muted yet lively colors of the game world [35]

Much like Dark Souls, BOTW emphasizes the role of its music, with it being slow, melodic and at times removed from the soundscape allowing players to sink into the ambience of Hyrule's forests, deserts and plains augmenting the cozy feeling of exploration through a lack of distractions. This focus on immersion and removal of potential distractions allows the player to slip into the flow state faster, leveraging its meditative properties to calm players. Whilst music is removed often, BOTW still uses its riding theme [38] to sooth players during explorative segments. Much like Fire link in Dark Souls, BOTW has isolated environments in the form of stables which provides the player with a place to trade, socialize, cook, and take a break from the dangerous world. The refuge offers players another "pocket of coziness" and hence an opportunity to relax. A plethora of video games use the aforementioned cozy elements to manufacture a comforting environment however this also establishes the irrefutable fact that traditionally non cozy games can be considered cozy and vice versa consuming the genre in a cloud of uncertainty. If a game like Dark Souls can be considered to have "cozy pockets" and Stardew to have "stressful pockets" where does the cozy genre classification begin and end? Does a game need to be cozy to a wide group or just one person to be considered part of the genre? Does a game need to only have a small focus on coziness to be considered a member of the genre? The term cozy game relies heavier on the feelings of players and less so on a concrete number of gameplay elements. If a player does not find Stardew cozy they will refrain from using the term, instead favoring to call it a farming simulator or fit it into another genre. However, this phenomenon does not occur in other game genres, for example, if a game is classified as a First Person Shooter, that classification cannot be changed because other game genres are classified by concrete elements rather than player emotions. The term cozy game is closer to a cultural, communal and convenient way to categorize games like Animal Crossing New Horizons and Stardew Valley rather than a recognized and unchangeable game classification.

Conclusion:

To conclude the report, the cozy genre undeniably exists and has grown majorly in popularity since and due to the COVID 19 pandemic and the subsequent increase in the demand for relaxing experiences. However, the genre is still a loose and communal way of describing a subset of games, with the term cozy being used more as a convenience than a precise classification unlike the usage of terms regarding other genres such as First-Person Shooter, Role-Playing Game and more. Many games found within the cozy genre could be just as easily categorized as Role Playing Games, farming simulators or life simulators.

Appendix:

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