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The Duality of Cozy Games: Cozy Agency, Neoliberalism, and Affect

Abstract

Cozy games can be thought of both as indoctrination into, and escapism from, anxieties caused by neoliberal ideology underpinning the late-capitalist apparatus championing productivity, progress, and quantifiable result generation. I draw on sociologist Anthony Giddens' notion of "ontological security" – which refers to our sense of stability and safety that we draw from continuous, and therefore reliable, predictable, unthreatening, and familiar sequences of events or activities happening in our everyday lives – and propose the concept of "cozy agency" to productively examine the aesthetics of games that are not characterized by a hypermasculine drive to successfully overcome challenges, nor by the inessentiality of player action typical of idle games. Research on lifestyle media, cuteness, and vegetal affect is put into dialogue to theorize the modalities of agency typical cozy game aesthetics can afford and constrain. Such an approach is in line with recent shifts in discourses of agency and interactivity in game studies, which criticize these two terms for being too binary, masculine, and not accommodating alternative forms of engagement with games, with recent scholarship on agency especially calling for a politicization of the term and a call to delve into the significance of meaningful empowerment to act in/with/on/through games.

Keywords: cozy games, agency, ontological security, lifestyle media, cuteness, neoliberalism, affect, vegetal turn

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Introduction

According to the Office of Communications in the UK, online gaming saw a big increase during the pandemic, with more than half of people aged 16 and above playing online or mobile games, and over 92% reporting that doing so helped with their mental health during the pandemic (Ofcom, 2021, p. 3). The Entertainment Software Association has also reported that today over two thirds of adults aged over 18 play videogames weekly (ESA, 2021). Admittedly this is a very Western-centric window into gaming habits. However, the recently published *Power of Play Report 2023* by The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment surveyed almost 13,000 people across 12 countries to conclude that globally, 71% of those surveyed play for stress relief, and 55% play to avoid isolation and loneliness, which are still well over half of those surveyed (UKIE, 2023). These statistics strongly suggest a shift: that videogames are increasingly relevant to contemporary life, not only for leisure, but also to help manage the progressively more stressful conditions of modern living. This potential in videogames to grant a sense of empowerment closely tied with positive affect became ever so visible during the pandemic, with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) taking central stage. Its impact cannot be understated, some conspiracy theories even speculating that Nintendo engineered the pandemic to increase console sales – also known as the "Nintendo did Covid-19" (LastWeekTonight, 2020). Reviewers and players both praised the game, with its relaxing and calming qualities often being mentioned. However, there was a less cheery competing narrative in the surrounding discourse, exemplified by this excerpt from a *Wired* journalist:

> I have spent my lockdown mining islands of tarantulas to pay for the construction of a Red Zen Bridge. It is lonely, terrifying work. When I'm not being bitten by wily spiders in the dead of night, I spend my days toiling in the fields: shaking trees, hitting rocks and fishing the seas clean. When I can afford the airfare, I travel to yet more islands and harvest them clean of every resource, filling my pockets until I can fill them no more. There is nothing but toil (Temperton 2020).

Overly dramatic tone aside, this quote captures the underbelly of Nintendo's pastoral fantasy succinctly: that happiness is intricately intertwined with the acquisition of capital, that said capital can be grown by exploiting natural resources, and, should one participate in the "Stalk Market", also deploying social networks to best profit on assets (i.e., "Turnips") whose value fluctuates. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is a textbook example of what has come to be called a "cozy game", as defined by Short et al. (2018) and introduced to game studies by Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020). So this begs the question, how can we make sense of this duality

in cozy games, that on the one hand they re(create) neoliberal systems, and on the other they offer escapism from them?

In answering this question I draw on sociologist Anthony Giddens' notion of "ontological security" (Giddens, 1984, 1991). I propose the concept of *cozy agency* to examine how this tension plays out in non-hegemonic forms of play, by putting research on lifestyle media, cuteness, and vegetal affect into dialogue. Such an approach is in line with recent shifts in discourses of agency and interactivity in game studies, which criticize these two terms the field them being too binary, masculine, and not accommodating alternative forms of engagement with games (Fizek, 2022; Jennings, 2019; Kagen, 2022; Keogh, 2018), with recent scholarship on agency especially calling for a politicisation of the term and a call to delve into the significance of meaningful empowerment to act in/with/on/through games (Chia & Ruffino, 2022). It is also following in the footsteps of recent efforts to consider agency through a sociological lens (Muriel & Crawford, 2020).

Towards the concept of cozy agency: Interactivity, agency, and coziness

There is a long history across disciplines to distinguish videogames from other media according to their interactivity, something which is, above all, a rhetorical move to establish cultural status against other, more prestigious media (Keogh, 2018, p. 171). Interactivity as a rhetorical construct is shaped by developer discourse, design aesthetics, and monetisation strategies (Consalvo & Paul, 2019), the reasons for which go back to the 19th century. A lack of women's rights pre-suffragettes and laws prescribing what are proper ways of being and moving through the world; a discomfort with purposelessness stemming from the (religiously coded) work ethic introduced by the industrial revolution; and videogames' roots in advances in computation in the military industry, among others, all contributed towards a particular understanding of what is considered a proper videogame: one characterized by performance, conflict, and masculinity (Kagen, 2022). Indeed, this hegemonic understanding of interactivity is so strong it is almost a "cybernetic mantra" (Fizek, 2022, p. 1) partly due to social, cultural, economic, and historical reasons, and partly due to the desire of both the medium and the discipline studying it to establish cultural status and a sense of worthiness. This preoccupation with how we can "do" things with games leads to a particular understanding of how games are and should be played: focusing on action, conflict, performance, or to put simply, doing, not being.

At the intersection of this doing and being is another idea with a conceptual history about as long as game studies itself: agency. Recent years saw a move towards politicising the term, with scholars challenging long-standing truisms

about agency as the ability to act freely on/with/through the world, problematising the relationship between humans and their social, economic, cultural, and technological contexts (Chia & Ruffino, 2022; Girina & Jung, 2020). Notably, agency has been linked with the promotion of individualistic selfhoods that are predominantly "masculinist, colonial, and extractivist" (Chia & Ruffino, 2022, p. 309). I argue that the "cozy" label is inherently political, similarly to the "casual" label (Chess, 2017), and that cozy games as a genre can be a good case study for further examining how hegemonic approaches to play are (re)constructed, but also how they can be challenged and their negative impact on the neoliberal subject mitigated.

The kind of challenge such games represent to more pervasive genres is by no means novel. Mobile games, for example, have been shown to transform not just our playing habits but also how we move through, and live in, spaces (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020). Focusing on subjectivity, there is research on how games can incentivize empathy (Belman & Flanagan, 2012; Pozo, 2018), as well as help establish, manage, and negotiate selfhood in a digitalized world (Gallagher, 2018). Videogames can help with managing these unique anxieties (McGonigal, 2011). They can be seen as a form of selfcare (Kowert, 2020), with increasing academic attention on how games can help improve wellbeing and mood (Reer & Quandt, 2020), and particularly in a peri-pandemic context and in connection to cozy games (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Walsdorff et al., 2022). More overtly concerned with coziness, Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) introduced a cozy game manifesto of sorts to game studies, outlining the main design components of cozy games as safety, abundance, and softness. The aesthetics of the genre have increasingly been connected to mental health benefits (Baker, 2022). Understanding coziness as a matter of degrees that games of both cozy and less cozy genres can possess, they argue that the genre's recent rise in popularity is connected to increasingly threatening anxieties about current affairs, the climate, and politics both global and local. The role of cozy games can therefore be, they argue, seen as offering "safe, emotional, heart-warming experiences" that are a different take on escapism: "not a fulfilment of a fantasy of greatness, but rather a fantasy of stability and safety" (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 228).

But what is it that we need escapism from? The contemporary zeitgeist is characterized by high risk (Beck, 1986) and constant fear of underachievement and failure (Silva, 2013). A unique characteristic of late modernity is what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls a striving for "ontological security". This term encapsulates the feeling of stability and security that we derive from consistent, dependable, predictable, non-threatening, and familiar sequences of events or activities that form part of our daily routines (Giddens, 1984, 1991). Ontological security is tightly connected to the notion of agency as it is formulated in response to "the

need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). The idea of there being a unified, neatly delineated, and stagnant self that works towards ontological security is somewhat overly simplistic, as per a social constructivist understanding of the performative self (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1956). Nonetheless, a self that strives for ontological security as a sort of inner equilibrium and that reflects on and manages social, cultural, political, and other contexts is a productive concept in examining cozy games and agency. This paper further complicates the argument that cozy games soothe us in a turbulent sociopolitical climate by arguing that on the one hand, they absolutely do, but on the other, they also represent as well as encourage less positive aspects of our world and ways of being in it. Individualistic, colonial, extractivist, capitalist, and in other ways harmful. I propose the concept of *cozy agency* as a modality of agency afforded by cozy games (which I understand to be videogames that have a high degree of coziness to their design), which can be theorized further in two steps. First, by looking at how cozy games' design facilitates the (re)construction of neoliberal subjectivity, and second, by thinking of cozy games as affective systems (Anable, 2018), where cuteness and vegetal affect in particular facilitate a (re)negotiation of player agency.

Lifestyle media and the cozy agency of the neoliberal subject

The late capitalist zeitgeist is characterized by neoliberal ideology championing productivity, progress, and quantifiable result generation (Boltanski & Chapello, 2006). Videogames are especially good at (re)creating hypercapitalist systems both on a representational and procedural level (Bogost, 2007; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Giddings & Harvey, 2018). Despite their non-threatening aesthetics, which are in stark contrast with more pervasive game genres, the same can be said to be true of cozy games: they represent, recreate, and play with, capitalism in various ways and to varying degrees. Those with resource management as a core mechanic are especially emblematic of neoliberal ideology and a romanticisation of work-as-play, as they often thematize rural fantasies (NYU Game Center, 2020), as well as a romance of work akin to motivational posters (Bogost, 2011). Tom Nook, the infamous tanuki landlord of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, has been widely regarded as a "capitalistic villain" (Vossen, 2020). Similarly, despite its creator's best efforts, *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) can also be seen as luring players into a gameplay loop that oversimplifies both our relationship with and responsibility for natural resources, and the intricacies of platonic and romantic bonds (Crowley, 2023). It would be hasty to write off the whole genre as neoliberal indoctrination, however. Thinking about the self and agency, and

looking at cozy games through the lens of lifestyle media, that is, media which (re)presents and (re)creates the ordinary, such as reality tv, cooking channels, and makeover shows, helps problematize this further.

Cozy games and lifestyle media have much in common: the focus on the mundane, themes centred on hobbies like cooking and gardening, the workplace, home improvement, and the management of interpersonal relationship. In doing so, lifestyle media offers strategies for betterment which shape the ideal neoliberal subject (Ouellette, 2009; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Palmer, 2004), which is not at all dissimilar from how games can have the capacity to shape how we feel about reality (Bogost, 2007). At the same time, lifestyle media can also be a helpful tool in managing contemporary anxieties (Murray & Ouellette, 2009). While tv shows like *Queer Eye* (Netflix, 2018–) can indeed support an expression of agency by narrativizing the journey of self-actualisation, at the same time consumers of lifestyle media are also encouraged to subscribe to strategies for betterment which are more often than not linked to purchasing products or services that can help facilitating the journey towards a better self. Doing so grants more independence from dysfunctional structures of care eroded by decades of austerity, but it also means more responsibility. The anxiety-mitigating effects of lifestyle media can thus weaken, and the "jostled self" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 33) can potentially begin to crumble under the weight of this newfound responsibility, in a way that is intricately connected to "consumer culture as a resource" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 33). In this way, lifestyle media is linked to consumerist self-expression: we learn about what we should aspire to, and how to best achieve it, we are given tips by experts, and it is all connected to conspicuous consumerism We can see this duality play out at the beginning of many cozy games, where the narrative framing often involves a new beginning for an exhausted and overworked player character, often set up with the iconography of urban living and all its threats on a happy subject.

A common starting point of cozy games is a new life. The player character gets a tabula rasa to right wrongs, implement change, and improve on their quality of life. All this is aided by abundant resources, and a return to manual labour which greatly oversimplifies farm labour, and is far detached from complex postindustrial work processes. Embarking on this journey of building a new life, which is in itself difficult to describe without metaphors linked to labour, the self is a site of labour which is romanticized in cozy games. For example, *Stardew Valley* begins with the following monologue from the player character's Grandpa on his death bed:

> There will come a day when you feel crushed by the burden of modern life and your bright spirit will fade before a growing emptiness. When that happens, my [boy/girl], you will be ready for this gift.

The following scene finds the player character in a soulless corporate office with two overseers looming over the open office panopticon, motivational messages on walls juxtaposed with tightly packed dirty desks. The camera zooms in on the tiny player character trapped in front of a disproportionately large screen. They reach for Grandpa's letter in the drawer telling of the gift of the farm in Stardew Valley, which will hopefully help reconnect with nature and friends. But what does that reconnection look like? The gameplay loop is harvesting natural resources, accumulation, manufacturing, and trading of goods, and accumulation of social capital. Similarly in *Ooblets* (Glumberland, 2020), the intro screen greets us with the message "Your life has been a giant toot" with large font in the centre screen.

> So far, you've spent all of that tooty life on the isolated Ahroh Island, where the people are stuffy and there aren't even any ooblets. That's why you've decided to leave. You're off to the distant shores of mainland Oob. A place you've only heard vague tales of. A fabled land of oddity, creativity, and… Ooblets.

In real life however, there rarely ever is a "self as a blank state" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 35). The neoliberal self is always intertwined with social, cultural, economic, environmental, and political contexts, representing the hegemony of norms they aspire to fit into. Raisborough argues that "to be seen, recognized, and approved (or not) brings into play a host of culturally specific norms and values against which the self is evaluated. This point considerably dilutes the potency of atomized individualism suggested by the 'blank state'" (p. 36). The duality of cozy agency therefore lies in this negotiation of neoliberal subjectivity. Such games offer an opportunity to both critique everything that is wrong with our world, provide strategies for controlling the uncontrollable particularly in the context of subjectivity and labour, but at the same time they continue to lock us into the same very logics of growth, progress, pressure, and individual responsibility that we are trying to escape from.

Cozy agency and affect: Cuteness and the vegetal turn

A useful framework that helps detaching interactivity and gameplay from each other is that of affect, as it facilitates the exploration of all experiences and modalities of action offered by gameplay, however interactive or non-interactive they may be (Frome, 2019, p. 858). We can think of *cozy agency* as the balancing act processing and potentially reconciling "mixed affect", that is, the capacity of games to simultaneously offer "hedonistic", i.e. joyful, and "eudaimonic", i.e., challenging or difficult experiences (Cole & Gilles, 2022). While there are videogames that hide rather punishing gameplay behind a veneer of cuteness, such as survival-horror

light *Don't Starve* (Klei, 2013) or rouguelike *Cult of the Lamb* (Massive Monster, 2022), cozy games generally can also offer relief from the pressures of the modern world, primarily due to their non-threatening game design and themes of safety, abundance, and an almost Rousseauian desire to return to simpler times.

An aesthetic category that emerged in response to late capitalism's challenges on the subject is cuteness. Indeed, "indulging in and communicating through cuteness provides an important coping strategy for subjects caught up in the precariousness inherent to neoliberal capitalism, and is thus central to the establishment of contemporary (inter)subjectivities" (Dale, 2017, pp. 1–2). While the authors of the cozy game manifesto explicitly state that cuteness does not map exactly onto coziness (Short et al., 2018), when it comes to the visual style of many cozy games, we can still observe less saturated colour palettes, rounded shapes, and an almost painterly style that is very clearly not concerned with the hubristic focus on realism driving graphics card and console sales. Similarly, soft and unthreatening sound design that lacks sharp loud noises, an ambient soundtrack, a focus on nature sounds over sounds of machinery, and happy animal noises create a warm and welcoming soundscape that offers escape from urban cacophony. Cuteness, as both an aesthetic and an affect, creates a hierarchical relationship between the passive cute object and the agentic subject observing it. Cozy games with cute aesthetics thus can grant players an amplified sense of agency because they are the subject taking in the cozy object, evoking a desire to nurture, care, and tend to, similar to the affective qualities of cuteness. Moreover, cuteness has the potential to reverse the affective consequences of its object, exemplifying "a situation in which making a world smaller – or, if you like, cuter – results in an uncanny reversal, changing its meaning into its exact opposite" (Ngai, 2012, p. 87). In this sense, cozy games with cute aesthetics provide strategies to reinstate a sense of control lost in our struggle for ontological security, providing the opportunity to turn a hostile world on its head, reinforcing agency by disarming its threats.

Another common feature in cozy games is a focus on the natural world and taming thereof. Plants are of course not unique to this genre. Bushes to hide in go hand in hand with stealth mechanics, while rendering highly detailed – and importantly, realistic – natural environments is a common way to showcase powerful graphics engines in shooters or driving games. For example, the first quarter of the Announce Trailer to *Forza Horizon 5* (Playground, 2021) is close-ups of palm trees rustling in the wind, lush jungle floors, a desert oasis with tall cacti, and verdant hills and valleys covered in grass and flowers, each rendered in 4K as per the video's watermark (Xbox, 2021). But these plants are only a backdrop. Interestingly, it is in a genre that capitalizes on the polar opposite of cozy affect that we can find more consequential vegetation: horror games. Games like *Blair Witch* (Bloober Team, 2019) exploit existing assumptions of forests

having a will of their own, where the horror affect comes from the player being forced to surrender their agency to menacingly designed agentic trees (Seller, 2020). The reversal of this argument can help make sense of why growing and tending to flowers, bushes, orchards, fields, and other vegetal objects in cozy games can encourage and enhance a sense of agency and empowerment.

Luce Irigaray, a philosopher linked to the so-called "vegetal turn" in metaphysics, writes the following about sensory perception and plants:

> Gazing at a rose can help me to achieve a concentration that many words or discourses are not able to grant me. The combination of the sensible qualities of the flower gathers me, thanks to an attention they awaken at various levels, and, imperceptibly, I am brought from concentration to contemplation. If I take the time to live such a state, it can be converted into a sort of ecstasy, which results from a culmination of energy (Irigaray & Marder, 2016, pp. 28–29).

Following on this, while virtual flora of course does not afford tactile or olfactory engagement, I would still argue that encountering the beautifully illustrated environments of *Wytchwood* (Alientrap, 2021) or the lush forests of *Bear and Breakfast* (Gummycat, 2020) can have a soothing effect. Automated animations of verdant canopies gently swaying, the ambient lull of blades of grass rustling together, or fallen leaves being swirled around by the gentlest of breezes thus can ground the player in the present, offering temporary respite. But there is more. Especially in cozy games that incorporate a farming mechanic, or feature looking after plants, we can argue that agency is further amplified. Vegetal agents in virtual environments are often conceived of as threats (Seller, 2020), feeding off our long-harboured anxieties that plants have a shared connected consciousness and will someday even take revenge for our millenia-long exploits (Wohlleben, 2015). While some cozy games, like *Strange Horticulture*, exploit this fear to create a strange and eerie atmosphere (Kagen & Minnen, 2023), games like many of the above-mentioned, as well as *My Time in Portia* (Pathea 2019), the recently re-released *Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life* (Marvellous, 2023), or even *Farming Simulator* (GIANTS, 2008) or *Graveyard Keeper* (Lazy Bear, 2018), offer a power fantasy that amplifies our sense of agency as we master the environment: purchase seeds, arrange rows of produce, plan and control their growth, decorate the surrounding farm, thereby becoming masters of nature's destiny.

What is even more interesting is that these cycles of labour do not tend to represent realistic processes of farm work. Most cozy games present a one-person-does-all approach, where delegation or automation is rarely an option (unless the player character's spouse AI picks up watering duties in *Stardew Valley*, for example), which romanticizes farm labour. As such, agency is amplified on multiple

levels. Firstly, we get to gaze upon beautiful flora, marvel at its organic beauty, and thereby find solace and peace in nature effectively running itself. Second, we get to control this flora, we are the arbiter of the fate of each flower, bush, and tree. Our progression in the game is intimately connected with how well we can care for these plants. And this power is further enhanced by our underlying fear of nature growing, quite literally, out of control.

Conclusion

In sociologyspeak, late modernity is characterized by fragmentation and a growing responsibility on the individual as the external structures holding up continuity have either collapsed or are changing so fast that no equilibrium can be established against them. With the increased responsibility comes more agency, granted, but that in turn brings with it a host of new anxieties. Much like how disaster films fell out of fashion post-9/11 because the possibility of the catastrophic loss of thousands of lives and the consequent international war suddenly did not feel like such an unlikely fantasy future, so are previously dominant game genres that thematize violence and threatening scenarios seeming to give way to less violent, less threatening ones. Cozy mechanics are increasingly found in non-cozy games, with some commentators forecasting a major shift in taste and trends (Campbell, 2022; The Escapist, 2022).

I argued that what drives this change can be explained with a striving for "ontological security" which is the sense of stability we so profoundly lack in neoliberal society. Drawing on research on neoliberal subjectivity and lifestyle media, cuteness and affect, and the vegetal turn, I examined the extent to which cozy games can be thought of as offering escapism from, or even resistance to, anxieties caused by neoliberal ideology. Challenging hegemonic understandings of interactivity and agency, I introduced the concept of *cozy agency* to explain how cozy games, on the one hand, encourage affective engagement that helps players cope with contemporary anxieties in everyday life due to comforting repetitive tasks that create a steady routine, a comparative lack of time-critical challenges creating a sense of safety, the abundance rather than scarcity of resources, and soothing audiovisual aesthetics; and on the other, how they (re)present and (re)enforce neoliberal doctrines of individualism, extractivism, and the neverending pursuit of progress and growth. The concept of *cozy agency* thus helped shed light on the modalities of agencies designing for coziness can support or restrain.

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