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Into the Magic Circle. If all is cozy, what isn't?

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Published in:
Into the Magic Circle

Publication date:
2024

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Bosman, F., & Pan, G. D. (2024). Into the Magic Circle. If all is cozy, what isn't? Some conceptual problems regarding cozy games. *Into the Magic Circle*, 1(1), 1. Article 11.

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If all is cozy, what isn't?

Some conceptual problems regarding cozy games

Gideon de Pan and Frank G. Bosman



Abstract

The emergence of ‘cozy games’ as a distinct game category gives rise to some fundamental questions about this category’s formal qualifications regarding ludic and narrative elements (including ludo-narrative dissonance), players’ experiences, developers’ intentions, and definitions of other constituent characteristics. Interpreting video games as digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts and employing a communication-oriented methodology, the two authors analyze, as case studies for their reflections on the problematic nature of the category, two well-known (if not unproblematic in their identification) ‘cozy games’ – *Gris* (Nomada Studio 2018) and *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2021): both games are identified as ‘cozy’ by critics and players, but – quite paradoxically – deal with not-so-cozy subject matters like death, dying, and grief.

Keywords.

Cozy games, ludo-narrative dissonance, communication-oriented methodology, cozification, cuteness.

‘A cozy management game about dying.’ That is how game publisher Thunder Lotus Games advertised their game *Spiritfarer*. *Spiritfarer* is a game about Stella, a young woman charged with the Charon-esque job of helping recently deceased people to ‘cross over to the other side’ by attending to their individual, particular needs and quirks. During this process, Stella – and thus the player – gets to know her ‘clients’ very intimately, not in the least because the recently deceased are but all too keen to spontaneously divulge their innermost secrets and feelings to her.

The game combines ‘elements of management and life simulator games with a puzzle platformer’ (Waszkiewicz 2023, 80) and is characterized by many critics and players as a ‘cozy game’. Amateur games’ critic ‘Wendy’ identifies the game on her blog *Her cozy gaming* as ‘a cozy management sim about dying’ (Her Cozy Gaming 2022). Her colleague Ellie from *Cozy Game Galore* voices similar sympathies: ‘this game is unique in its ability to create a cozy environment with a bittersweet twist (...) it astounded me, but it was also the comfort of the gameplay that kept me coming back for more’ (Cozy Games Galore 2022). The *Washington Post* comments in its review that the game ‘hopes to make the subject of death comfortable, even cozy, by focusing on relationships and care in people’s last moments while guiding them to the other side’ (Favis 2020). And *IGN* professional game critic Bashir (2022) concludes his review of the game as follows:

With the rise of wholesome games, more and more indie experiences ease players into a warm and soothing embrace with these cozy games, covering a broad spectrum of subject matter. Where *Spiritfarer* fits into this equation is how it is a cozy indie management sim about dying, of all things (2022).

Similar to *Spiritfarer*, *Gris* is a game that also deals with death. The game is a platformer about Gris, a young woman who copes with loss. The player directs her through a variety of different, painted environments, each featuring specific color schemes, from red deserts and a green forest, up to a dark blue ocean, with each setting symbolizing different stages of her grieving process, including her recurrent ups-and-downs.

Like *Spiritfarer*, the game is often called cozy. Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun write that: ‘*Gris* uses cozy aesthetics to communicate the message about processing grief’ (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2022, 236). YouTuber Cozy K describes *Gris* as a game that deals with emotional themes such as grief, and recommends the game, ‘if you wanna feel validated in those feelings’ (Kennedy 2022, 5:49). Meanwhile, reviewer Michael Kain writes that the game holds the potential to help people who are struggling to come to terms with grief (Kain 2019).

At first glance, it seems like a paradox: how can *Spiritfarer* and *Gris*, games on death, dying, depression, and grief, so easily and universally be qualified as ‘cozy’? Cozy games are a relatively new category, encompassing famous games like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), *Animals Crossing* (Nintendo AED 2001) *Unpacking* (Witch Beam 2021) and *Beacon Pines* (Hiding Spot Games 2022). (The last one also seems paradoxical, being identified by game critic Morton as ‘cozy horror’) (Morton 2022). As critic Afzal argues in his own list of cozy games with ‘not-so-cozy-subject matter’, these kinds of games are characterized by:

...a bright, welcoming aesthetic, an easy-going gameplay loop that encourages the player to set their own pace and avoids punishing them for straying from that, and narrative content that avoids heavy subjects in favour of keeping feel-good vibes throughout the game (Afzal 2022).

There seems to be an apparent paradox within the category of cozy games, or rather with the identification of some games as ‘cozy’, concerning the ‘cozy’ aesthetics and mechanics on the one hand, and thematically heavy narratives on the other. To research this paradox in more detail, we will first start

with a somewhat more in-depth discussion on the characteristics of the cozy game category as a whole, especially concerning the identifiers that mark individual games as ‘cozy’. Secondly, we will address the above-mentioned paradox regarding ludo-narrative dissonance, a well-known concept from the field of game studies. Thirdly, we will discuss the process of transforming existing non-cozy games into cozy ones, as is discussed within the player communities.

In order to do so convincingly, we will define video games as digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts (Bosman and Wieringen 2022). Video games are digital ‘objects’, separating them conceptually from ‘physical’, tabletop games. Video games have both ludic and narrative elements, that is, they feature interactive game mechanics *and* they convey a narrative (if not necessarily in equal measure and/or in synchrony with one another as we will discuss later). Besides this, video games are texts, in the sense that they are a means of communication between a sender and a receiver, and can be analyzed as such.

1. The coziness of video games

In recent years the term ‘cozy games’ has arisen in an attempt to define a specific variety of computer games. According to Daniel Cook’s report of a meeting of the game design think tank Project Horseshoe, the supposed main goal of a cozy game is to let the player reflect and think (Cook 2018). Cozy games generally try to accomplish this in three ways. The first is by offering gameplay that is focused on ‘safety’ (ibid). Cozy games generally lack competitiveness and feature only a small penalty for failure, if failure is at all possible (ibid).

Secondly, because of the game’s lack of difficulty, players can focus on its other aspects, such as pondering its themes or appreciating its visual design. Lastly, the aesthetics of cozy games are directed at ‘softness’, which means these games often use soft and warm colors, slow-paced gameplay, nature-inspired environments, and calming, diegetic audio design. This results in games that are focused on inspiring feelings of safety and warmth within the player, instead of providing challenging and competitive gameplay.

According to the researchers at Project Horseshoe, this lack of danger and competition should provide a playing experience that is focused on growth and self-reflection, with the authors stating:

Cozy games give players space to deal with emotional and social maintenance and growth. 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 (Cook 2018).

The supposed goal of cozy games is to inspire emotional growth within the player by providing them with a relaxing, cozy, experience. Despite this terminology, Cook and his colleagues note that ‘cozy game’ is not a strict definition, but instead a loosely defined ‘aesthetic goal’, the experience of which depends on the player (ibid). This means that the term cozy game is first of all used as a guideline by which a player may be more inclined to experience a game as cozy, however, the mere implementation of these features does not guarantee that the game is experienced as such.

Other researchers have been inspired by Project Horseshoe's work to further elaborate on the term cozy games. Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun write that 'coziness' in games can be experienced in a variety of ways. The first is coherence, wherein cozy aesthetics are combined with gameplay that lacks challenge and competitiveness, allowing the player to play games at their own pace (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020, 233). The second category, called 'dissonance', entails an incongruity between cozy aesthetics and themes that are about mental health (ibid, 233-234). Games within this category often lack challenging gameplay and feature cozy aesthetics for the purpose of providing the player with a safe space to reflect on and work on their mental health (ibid).

Marissa M. Baker draws upon research about ideal counseling spaces, stating that this variety of cozy games is not unlike a counselor's office, which may also feature natural elements such as vistas of green spaces, soft ambient music, and light colors (Baker 2022, 254). These elements are meant to relax the client, with the purpose of influencing their emotions to improve the counseling session (ibid). This vision of dissonant cozy games as akin to a counselor's space might be true regarding the sensory experience of these places, but the question is whether these places qualify as 'cozy', as the people that seek counseling may have to talk about parts of their life that make them feel uncomfortable or agitated. This makes the experience of these places not necessarily a cozy healing process.

The third category, situational, refers to games in which occasional moments of coziness may occur (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020, 235). A player may find moments of safety, abundance, and softness in games that 'are not otherwise cozy', often in zones where the player is not at risk of losing the game (ibid). While players might experience these moments as cozy, it is hard to define these 'games that are otherwise not cozy' (ibid). Cook and his colleagues write that coziness is largely dependent on the individual player and, as such, the image of safety, abundance, and softness is not experienced by every player in the same way (Cook 2018). Some players may find the coherent and dissonant cozy games to be infuriating or boring because they are simply not in the mood for something that lacks competition, or may not want to play them (ibid).

But what are these other games, if so much of what defines cozy games is dependent on a player's personal experience of coziness? Within the literature there seems to be a contradiction between whether cozy games should be considered a distinct category of video games, or a concept by which players can label a particular game. Cook writes of 'cozy' as an aesthetic goal that can be achieved by designing a game's audiovisual presentation and gameplay in a particular way so the player may be more likely to experience a game as cozy, while Waszkiewicz and Bakun attempt to create a concrete definition from different experiences of coziness.

This apparent conceptual problem regarding the exact description and definition of what a 'cozy game' is (and it not), can be somewhat clarified by differentiating between the various 'identifiers' marking the category and its games, based on their position within the games' communication schemes. Video games, like all texts, feature several communicative layers, within and outside of the game's textual world (see image #1).

Entanglement: digital games

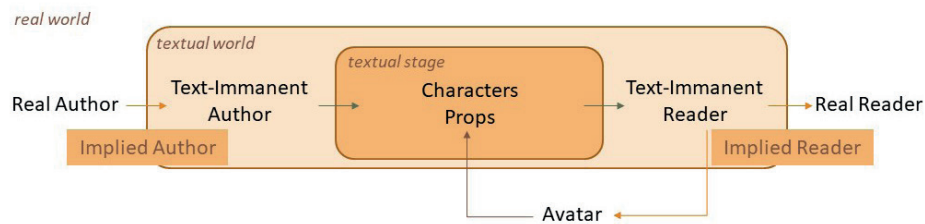


Image #1. A schematic representation of the communication within and outside of a game text. Source: Bosman and Wieringen 2022, 13.

Outside the game text, there is a real author – *in casu* an individual game developer of any given game, ‘cozy’ or not – and a real reader – *in casu* an individual player playing any given game, who may or may not experience any game as ‘cozy’ or not. Inside the game text, we find the text-immanent author and the text-immanent reader of the (‘cozy’) game. The first directs and manipulates the characters, props, and stage of the narrative (game) world, sometimes directly (through the breaking of the fourth wall), but usually indirectly (through the characters) telling its story to the latter. The amount of appreciation a real reader of any text has for that text is related to the (implicit and probably subconscious) identification of that real reader with the text-immanent one. If this identification fails, the reader/listener/player will be annoyed, dislike the novel/film/game, and – perhaps – write a negative review on a critics’ website. If the identification succeeds, the opposite happens: the reader/listener/player will be pleased, and post a positive review online.

Games as a medium have a unique characteristic in comparison with other mediums like films or novels. Because of the necessary interactive nature (the *ludus* part of the game being a ludo-narrative text), the text-immanent reader is ‘entangled’ with one of the characters of the game’s story, its in-game avatar, very probably the game’s main protagonist. This means that the game, as an interactive text, is communicated by the text-immanent author to, about, and through the text-immanent reader: ‘to’ in the sense of any text; ‘about’ in the sense that everything that is done to the avatar is also done to the immanent player; and ‘through’ in the sense that the immanent player has a certain amount of freedom to choose how and when to interact with the game world and story (of course limited by the immanent author’s direction). This ‘entanglement’ is game-immanent. The game-external variant is the identification between the real player and the game-immanent player: the greater the identification, the greater the emotional investment and attachment of the real player to his or her in-game representation (avatar).

If applied to the discussion on what denotes ‘coziness’ in a game, the different possibilities of identification proposed by game players, critics, and scholars are related to their differing positions in the game’s communication. A game can be deemed a ‘cozy game’ because of the developers’ framing. As discussed above, Thunder Lotus Games is very deliberate with its framing of *Spiritfarer* as ‘a cozy management game about dying.’ By advertising it as such – since advertising is also a performative way of speaking – it becomes what it is advertised as (Sunderland and Denny 2007).

On the other hand, the developers of Nomanda Studio refrain from framing their *Gris* as ‘cozy’. This did not, however, prevent it from being called so by enthusiasts writing on the game online, as we have shown above. Therefore, another identifier consists of individual real readers/players, who deem the game they are currently playing as ‘cozy’, because their individual gaming experiences align with their own personal (positive) associations with the notion of in-game ‘coziness’. As shown above, both *Spiritfarer* and *Gris* are identified by individual games and critics as ‘cozy games’, but at least in some of these cases, the identification of these games as such seems to be based on individual, subjective, often implicit, and sometimes contradictory considerations. A game is, simply put, cozy because some player thinks it is.

A third identifier is the text-internal communication between the immanent author and immanent reader, supplying concrete and non-subjective criteria to decide whether a game can be thought of as ‘cozy’ or not. Cook’s elements of safety, softness, and lack of difficulty (Cook 2018), and Waszkiewicz and Bakun’s lack of challenge and of competitiveness (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020), both discussed in detail above, could qualify as such criteria, if not for their inherent real reader tendency. In other words, if a game conveys feelings of safety to a player and/or possesses a challenge to a player, these are not objective categories, but – again – subjective ones. For some players, *Spiritfarer* and *Gris* will provide a feeling of safety without real challenges, while for other players this can be very well not the case, for example because of these real players’ lack of familiarity with the mechanics of video games and their narrative tropes, and/or because their narrative subject matter of death and grieving is confrontational. So, we still lack concrete and objective criteria that do not depend on real authors’ or real readers’ subjective identifications.

A fourth identifier, somewhat smoothing out these problems, are the implicit author and implicit reader, who – combined – anchor the communication between the world of the text and the world outside of it by providing the socio-linguistic-historical paradigm in which the text has been conceived. In the case of *Gris* and *Spiritfarer*, these include: knowledge of the English language (or another languages which the game provides localization for), basic knowledge of narrative tropes and game mechanics, basic understanding of Greek mythology, the concept of anthropomorphized animals, afterlife, recently deceased people having ‘unfinished business’. A reading of *Gris* would require the player to additionally be able to solve the game’s puzzles and interpret the symbolism behind its narrative, as the game’s story is inferred rather than explicitly told.

Regarding the category of ‘cozy games’ like *Spiritfarer* and *Gris*, this paradigm of implied author and implied reader – necessarily shared by the real author, text-immanent author, and text-immanent reader, but **not** necessarily by the real reader – also includes the interrelated concepts of ‘cozy games’, ‘coziness’, and ‘cuteness’ (Dale et al. 2017). The existence of this paradigm helps real players – if they have access to that paradigm – to understand the communication of the text and their identification with the text’s immanent reader. In the case of cozy games, everyone having a certain Western, cultural literacy will be able to ‘tap into’ the general, if not implicit, characteristics of the category. The downside is that these criteria are vague, implicit, and – if not subjective and personal – intersubjective and interpersonal at best.

2. The not-so-coziness of video games

As previously mentioned, Waszkiewicz and Bakun differentiate between three different categories of coziness in games. Of these categories, coherent, dissonant, and situational, the dissonant category merits a closer look because of its contradictory nature. In writing on dissonant cozy games, Waszkiewicz and Bakun note that these games feature a mix of the playing experience and audiovisual presentation that are often associated with cozy games, but that these traits are often combined with stories about mental health and traumatic experiences (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020, 233-234). The combination of the cozy presentation and heavy subject matter results in 'gripping, often uncomfortable narratives of difficult topics' (ibid, 233). Yet, this combination 'might be considered paradoxical', as the category is a mix of cozy visuals and non-risky gameplay, combined with subject matter that might make the player uncomfortable (ibid). The latter part is a trademark of 'empathy games', games that are meant to confront the player with themes and narratives about trauma, grief, and the experiences of marginalized groups (ibid, 234).

The question is whether the cozy aesthetics of the games in this category cover up the contradiction between the gameplay and the audiovisual presentation on the one side, and the narrative on the other. Experiencing a game's coziness is, namely, not a given fact, especially if this coziness is offset by a narrative that might make the player feel uncomfortable. Yet, within the literature regarding cozy games, the coziness of dissonant cozy games indeed seems to be accepted as a given fact. An example of this is Marissa M. Baker's above-mentioned comparison between dissonant cozy games and counseling spaces . In this comparison, the relaxing audiovisual presentation of the counseling space is seen as a sign that the space will be immediately perceived as such. However, it is important to note that the conversations held within a therapist's office or a counselor's office can be experienced as far from cozy. If we go along with Baker's comparison, dissonant cozy games can also be experienced as unnerving or uncomfortable by the player. The cozy presentation can be seen as an attempt to put the client, or player, at ease, but this ease is not guaranteed, especially when the theme of the conversation focusses on trauma or depression.

Although dissonant cozy games might be experienced as relaxing, the contrast between a player's playing experience and the game's narrative themes might also result in cases of ludo-narrative dissonance, a disjunction between what a game asks the player to do, and the narrative it is trying to tell (Hocking 2007). First coined by former LucasArts creative director Clint Hocking, the term ludo-narrative dissonance refers to instances in computer games wherein actions taken while playing a game contradict the game's narrative, or vice versa (ibid). As Frederic Seraphin writes in a literature review about the term, the issue at play in ludo-narrative dissonance is 'a state of emersion that is triggered by a semiotic mismatch between play and narration' (Seraphin 2016, 3). Instead of being immersed in a game, possible contradictions between gameplay and narrative result in the player experiencing "emersion", the feeling of being pulled out of the experience (ibid, 1). Within the context of dissonant cozy games, this could mean that the dissonance between the cozy aesthetics and a game's themes could lead to the player being more preoccupied with this contrast than using a game for thinking through a game's theme, which Cook sees as one of the primary benefits of 'cozy' game design.

Both our case studies – if identified as 'cozy games' – are prone to suffer from this dissonance. First, we must make clear that a ludo-narrative dissonance can occur at all four levels of communication, as discussed above. The dissonance can be built in by the developers on purpose (but this is usually pure speculation, since developers rarely discuss their inspirations), or it can be the focus-point of the game-

immanent communication. Games like *Spec Ops. The Line* (Yager Development 2012) or *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) are (non-cozy) games that purposely conjure up a ludo-narrative dissonance to make a point, that is, the non-existence of human freedom, primarily within video games, but also in the world outside the games (Bosman forthcoming). Of course, the dissonance can also occur at the level of the real players of the game: individual players can have an experience of disconnection between game play and game narrative.

Spiritfarer and *Gris* suffer from a ludo-narrative dissonance, at least at the level of the text-immanent communication. The game mechanics of both games are ‘cozy’ enough – they provide a ‘safe’ environment for a player, without any real challenge and without any competition, but the narratives of both games are about helping recently deceased people to ‘cross over’, as well as about grief and the piecing together of one’s life after a tragic loss. Both games are – narratologically – more situated in the realm of counseling than in the realm of cozy gaming. Because, again, counseling is very useful for many people, its praxis is not necessarily associated with joy, comfort, and coziness.

Again, it is very possible that individual real players of both *Spiritfarer* and/or *Gris* experience these games as cozy in one way or another, but from a text-internal perspective, these games defy, at least narratologically, all coziness. Grief and saying permanent goodbyes to loved ones is *not* cozy in and of itself: it is something we all want to avoid as much as possible, even if we all know it is almost impossible to do that entirely successfully.

3. The ‘cozification’ of video games

The above-mentioned articles demarcate the difference between cozy games and other games based on the former’s usage of soft aesthetics and gameplay design that prioritizes comfort over challenge. Meanwhile, players are more lenient regarding their own definitions, arguing that colorful visuals are enough to make a game feel cozy, or that games can even be made cozy by making particular choices while playing the game.

The presence of colorful visuals leads certain players to argue that some games are cozy, even if their gameplay contradicts this. The Reddit-thread titled ‘Can JRPGs be cozy?’ shows commenters arguing that games with colorful and soft visuals, such as *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (Level-5 2013) and *Eternal Sonata* (Tri-Crescendo 2007), count as cozy games (JillyBean7 2023; SneakingApple 2023). While it is possible that individual players experience these games as cozy, it seems unlikely these games were intended as such, given their emphasis on combat, which falls under the competitiveness cozy games should avoid (Cook 2018). What happens here is that some real readers/players apply the label ‘cozy game’ because of the visual appearance of these games, while ignoring the aspects that are not cozy, such as an emphasis on competition. Some players even claim that some games can be made cozy. Examples of this include games that can be made cozy by turning down the difficulty settings, as in *Persona 3* (Atlus 2006), or using console commands, as can be done in *Valheim* (Iron Gate Studios 2021; Jennatar 2023; Madnessdanz 2023).

These examples reveal a difference between academic definitions of coziness in games and how consumers, or real readers, use the term. Despite the somewhat contradictory categories, the academic perspective on cozy games is narrower, with a large emphasis on presumed coziness in both a game’s audiovisual presentation and gameplay. Meanwhile, players are much more lenient in their categorization, which leads to instances of games being labelled cozy based on visual appearance, or the idea that games can be made cozy, even if they were not intended as such.

The ‘cozification’ of non-cozy games, as we have discussed above, implies – from a communication perspective – one of two things, depending on whether the manipulation is done within the game itself or outside of it. The first applies to lowering the game’s difficulty (since that is an option given explicitly in the game by the immanent author to the immanent reader), the use of cheat codes or console commands (since that is also a possibility within the game without having to manipulate the actual code of the game from the outside). The second applies to hacking and modding, since both must be done outside the game itself, transforming the game into a new version of itself. In the first case, one and the same game text is maintained; in the second case, the hacker/modder *de facto* creates a new game text. This hacked/modded version of the game stands in an intertextual relationship with its original version (see Image #2).

Intertextuality

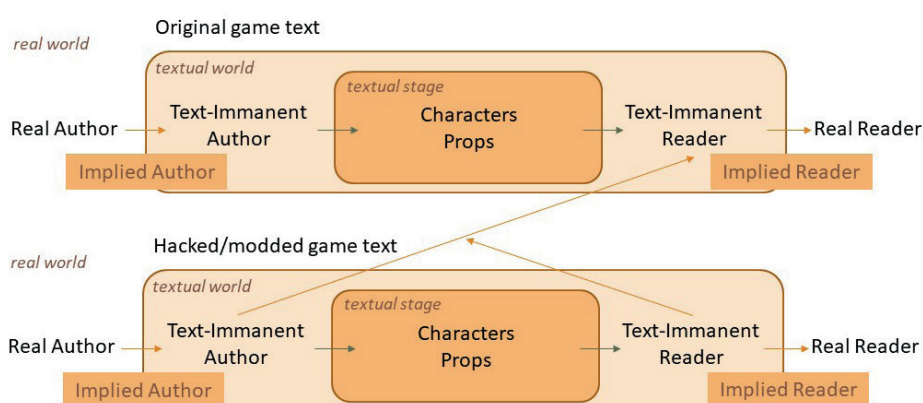


Image #2. A schematic representation of the intertextuality between two game texts. Source: Bosman and Wieringen 2022, 22.

In the first case – lowering the game’s difficulty and/or using cheat codes – the ‘coziness’ of the game lies in the experience of the real player applying those options to the game he/she is playing. The original game text is not changed – it is still a ‘cozy game’ (if it already was one) or it is still not a cozy game (if it never was). However, in the second case (hacking/modding), the coziness can also be found at the level of the text-immanent author and immanent reader of the game’s new version. When the hacker/modder, operating as the real author of the game’s new version, changes the core gameplay mechanics and/or narrative elements, the effect – whether intended or not – can be that the new game appears to be a ‘cozy’ one, that is, at the level of the text-immanent communication and/or at the level of the real player.

This does not solve the problem discussed above regarding the objective characteristics of the cozy game as a category, but it demonstrates that the ‘cozification’ of non-cozy games can operate at three different communicative levels.

Conclusions

The discussion on what constitutes and what does not constitute a ‘cozy game’ remains the object of debate among game scholars, critics, and players. The discussion on ‘cozy games’ reveals three different ‘problems’ concerning the very concept: the identification itself, the occurrence of ludo-narrative dissonances, and the ‘cozification’ of non-cozy games. In this article, we have used the communication-oriented analysis to analyze these problems in more depth.

Concerning the identification of ‘cozy games’, we encounter four different instances of such identifiers: the actual developer of the game (real author), individual players experiencing a game (real reader), concrete and non-subjective criteria as discussed by various cited scholars (immanent author-immanent reader), or through the paradigm of the implicit author and implicit reader. Concerning the ludo-narrative dissonance and the ‘cozification’ of non-cozy games, both closely connected to the point of identification, we have encountered games that are identified as ‘cozy’ that feature contradictory ludic and narrative elements, and games that are not identified as ‘cozy’ at all, but are manipulated in such a way that they, all the same, function as such.

The conclusion seems to be that every game can be or become ‘cozy’ in its own way and in its own right, depending on various variables mostly concerned with individual players identifying specific games as ‘cozy’. The flexibility of the category– that can incorporate a great number of games in this way – has the downside that it ultimately stops being a distinguishable feature of any game. If (almost) all games can be or can become cozy, none of them are.

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