

# The Twelfth Annual Game Design Think Tank

## Project Horseshoe 2017



### Group Report: Coziness in Games: An Exploration of Safety, Softness, and Satisfied Needs

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## Overview

Coziness is a common aesthetic in popular games such as Animal Crossing or Stardew Valley, yet it is rarely discussed within design circles. Our group of designers did a deep dive to understand:

- What is 'Cozy'?
- How do we make our games more cozy?

What we found during our exploration:

- Coziness is an ingredient that can be applied to a wide variety of both casual and core genres.
- Coziness can help your game appeal to broader audiences.
- Coziness helps retention by giving players control over pacing while still maintaining engagement during periods of rest.
- Coziness is a subversively humanizing design practice in a society built on monetizing basic animal needs.

## 1. What is Cozy?

### Definition of Coziness

Coziness itself refers to how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness.

**Safety:** A cozy game has an *absence* of danger and risk. In a cozy game, nothing is high-risk, and there is no impending *loss* or *threat*. Familiarity, reliability, and one's ability to be vulnerable and expressive without negative ramifications all augment the feeling of safety. To maximize safety, activities should be voluntary and opt-in so that players never feel the threat of coercion. **Abundance:** A cozy game has a sense of *abundance*. Lower level Maslow needs (food, shelter) are met or being met, providing space to work on higher needs (deeper relationships, appreciation of beauty, self actualization, nurturing, belonging). Nothing is lacking, pressing or imminent. **Softness:** Cozy games use strong aesthetic *signals* that tell players they are in a *low stress* environment full of abundance and safety. These are gentle and comforting stimuli, where players have a lower state of arousal but can still be highly engaged and present. There's often an intimacy of space and emotion, with a slower tempo pace and manageable scope (spatially, emotionally, and otherwise). Soft stimuli implies authenticity, sincerity, and humanity.

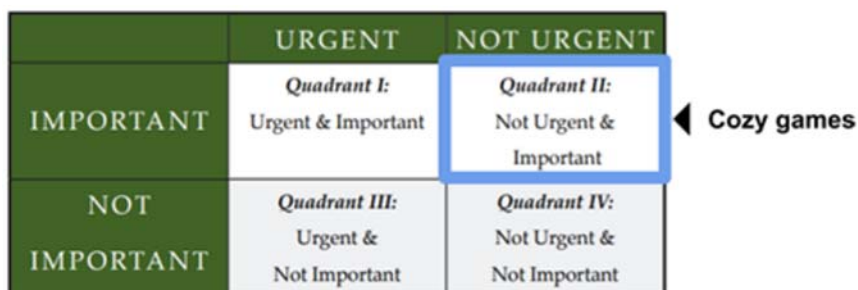
## Fulfilling needs

Two models help us understand how coziness yields meaningful gameplay. **First, we see play as a form of safe practice:** People play because it allows them to experiment with a particular set of skills and activities that would otherwise be expensive or impossible in the real world. The opportunity to fight off attackers might not exist in a person's day-to-day desk job, but a game lets them practice those skills safely and easily. **Second, we see games as a means of satisfying unmet needs:** The human animal is motivated to fulfill various needs. For example, when we get hungry, we are motivated to find food and eat. Players seek to fulfill their emotional and psychological needs within games. Each game genre taps into a highly specific set of motivations. For example a survival game such as 'Don't Starve' is very upfront about the fact that it, mechanically and thematically, lets players explore the planning and tactical issues around getting food. This ties back into play as practice. In Don't Starve, you obviously are not being rewarded with actual food. But we are still immensely motivated to practice that associated skill if we are subconsciously worried about survival. So as a designer, it is incredibly important to understand what motivations your players are pursuing and how your game design helps them practice mastery related to their needs. This design process is at the heart of making an engaging game. **Cozy games help player practice fulfilling higher order needs:** Cozy games also fulfill player needs. However, unlike a game like Don't Starve which focuses on base needs like starvation, cozy games create spaces for higher order needs like mastery, self-reflection and connectedness. Consider Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. At the bottom are pressing needs like thirst, hunger and safety. When these are present, they immediately *grab* the limited attention of the player and deprioritize those higher order needs. It is impossible to have a quiet conversation on a difficult subject while being attacked by a bear.



*Maslow's hierarchy of needs as it relates to coziness*

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.



*Covey's Time Management Grid, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.*

We can think of this also from the perspective of time and attention management. In Covey's time management, tasks can be categorized along two axes: Urgent to Not Urgent and Important to Not Important. When people manage their time, there's a natural tendency (in alignment with Maslow's Hierarchy) to focus on Urgent tasks. Games in particular excel at filling the player's time with Urgent but not very Important activities. Cozy games are designed to focus the player on Not Urgent yet Important tasks that are unfortunately deprioritized. Admittedly, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Covey's Time Management Grid are older motivational models, but the same key insight can be recontextualized in terms of the newer Self Determination Theory (SDT). SDT proposes that people thrive when they are able to pursue intrinsic motivations such as Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness. They stop thriving when they are presented with extrinsic motivators that suck up their attention. Not surprisingly, many of the factors identified by Maslow and Covey are powerful extrinsic motivators that disrupt a player's healthy prioritization of needs.

## Negating Coziness

**The process of negating coziness:** Because many common game mechanics are derived from satisfying lower order needs, it is very easy to accidentally disrupt the player's feeling of coziness. If a system brings about a strong lower order need, the player's attention will immediately shift to deal with the more pressing issue. High priority, low order needs get dealt with first; that's just how humans prioritize. When this happens, coziness evaporates. **Factors that negate coziness include:**

- **Extrinsic reward:** Almost any form of extrinsic reward generates a pressing transactional short-term need.
- **Danger, fear, threat:** Any sense of impending danger triggers biological responses in the player. Their sympathetic nervous system kicks, adrenaline floods the body, and memory suffers. Often times, cozy spaces are presented as reprieve or refuge from these dangers.
- **Responsibility:** Responsibility requires emotional labor: the effort to plan, think, and execute on a plan to resolve something. Being responsible generates high priority need/expectation. Examples include any form of mandatory maintenance, needy pets, companions, or entities that require constant, non-optional care.
- **Unpleasant distractions:** Distractions such as notifications, sudden noises or nagging remove a player's autonomy over their focus. Their agency around being able to explore and appreciate a game in their own way is lost. Distractions also demand attention, generating a need.
- **Intense stimulus:** Anything sudden, disproportionately bright or loud, or invasive/proximal can diminish the feeling of coziness.
- **Distance:** Vast spaces eliminate a sense of safety by being unknowable. However, it is still possible to create very subtle or natural thresholds that establish a cozy space within the context of something broad: like a campfire in the middle of a wood.
- **Phobia sources:** Anything commonly associated with a phobia, such as spiders, guns, or knives, can suggest harm or threat. This can be mitigated by context: for instance, the presence of a knife in order to cook or perform other nurturing activities, especially if it cannot be used for violence.
- **Non-consensual social presence:** Anything non-consensual removes a player's feeling of safety, but this is especially relevant in social situations. An uninvited presence can feel threatening, or just suggest an unsought expectation of interaction, reciprocation, or responsibility.
- **Confinement:** Many small spaces are considered cozy since you can quickly inspect them to see if you are safe. But, this sort of coziness requires choice, and in turn inescapable small spaces can instead be seen as claustrophobic and controlling. A prison cell is generally not cozy.
- **Deception, betrayal, lies, insincerity:** These forms of social masking create doubt and apprehension about social interaction, turning them from fulfilling and need-satisfying experiences into threatening and dangerous ones.
- **Opulence, pretentiousness, "fanciness":** Most cozy spaces veer somewhat more *mundane* than pretentious or opulent. On the one hand, fanciness can often create social comparison pressure, or come off as insincere, diminishing social safety. On the other hand, most opulence lacks the familiarity that often contributes to a feeling of safety.

**An example of negating coziness:** Consider the omnipresent pop-up, especially as it is used in a normally cozy franchise like Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp. When a notification intrudes on your gaming experience, it uses **intense stimuli** (noise, vibration, movement, colors) to *generate a need* that must be dealt with. You have a new **responsibility** to deal with the message by either investigating it further or manually dismissing it. It is almost always **non-consensual** since you never explicitly agreed to have your life interrupted by that pop-up in this particular moment. The theoretical opt-in that occurs at the systems level is more rote than intentional. If unwanted, a notification becomes a **distraction**. In order to **extrinsically motivate** the user to act as desired, notifications often use the promise of rewards, the **threat** of a lost opportunity, and marketing spin to **deceive** the user into interacting. It is absolutely possible to design consensual notifications that provide cozy value to the player, but most do not and will slowly poison a cozy atmosphere. **Using contrast to enhance coziness:** These same negating elements can be used to *enhance* coziness if they are safely outside the player's defined cozy space (spatial, emotional, etc) by providing contrast and juxtaposition. For example, cold rain against a window emphasizes the warmth of a reading nook without threatening to disrupt it. If that same cold rain was blowing through a broken window, the scene would no longer be cozy.

## Cozy-Adjacent: Overlapping But Not-Cozy

Coziness overlaps with several different aesthetics and themes, but has a unique identity separate from the following:

- **Cute:** While cuteness resonates with the safety aspect of coziness, as well as the desire to nurture/satisfy needs, many threatening and needy things can be cute without providing coziness.
- **Childlike:** In a similar vein, childlike games are often safe, but can have very high levels of stimulus and often lack the ability to focus on higher level needs.
- **Small World:** Many small world games have a very manageable scope and smallness that generates a cozy feel, but small worlds can also be threatening, needy, or intense.
- **Romance:** Cozy spaces often facilitate intimacy and a deepening of emotional connection, but romance opens a field to any number of aggressive or risky social encounters.
- **Home:** Homes are familiar, but often stressful or full of responsibility, which negates coziness.
- **Party:** While generating a cozy connective social tissue between players, parties are often high stimulus and high intensity, negating coziness.
- **Politeness:** When politeness is thoughtful and kind, it can be cozy, but politeness can also be taken to an extreme, becoming insincere or passive-aggressive, which is anti-cozy.
- **Wealth:** While wealth allows for the satisfaction of basic needs, it is not in and of itself cozy, and culturally can also come with societal expectation/responsibility of accumulating additional wealth.

## 2. Why Make Cozy Games

There's an inherent joy to making games that help players explore their higher order needs. It feels good to help others. However, there are also distinctly practical benefits.

- Create blue ocean games for untapped psychographics
- Increase retention by minimizing churn
- Attract a better community

## Blue ocean products for unmet player motivations

Games are a product that serves a player need. By uncovering unmet player motivations we can invent new product categories or broaden the appeal of existing designs. **Old motivational models:** Many older game designs use pop-science motivational paradigms that are biased towards western, individualistic, and masculine perspectives. In many cases, the underlying psychological models were derived by either





sampling only young college aged men, animal experiments, or by actively throwing out data from groups that didn't fit a particular hypothesis. From a business perspective, they fail to robustly describe motivations of women, people from non-western countries, older adults, or people with children.

- **Fight or flight:** Derived predominantly from electroshock tests on young male rats, this theory says that when our sympathetic nervous system kicks in due to a perceived threat, we will either attack or run away. Though this reaction does exist, humans seem to have a far richer set of behavioral responses not captured in this theory.
- **Zero sum economics:** In this model, resources are highly limited and if I take a resource, you lose that resource. There's a long history of match-based competitive games such as Chess or Soccer derived from zero-sum systems. However, economics as a whole is based primarily on trade transactions that generate value for both parties. Even more concerning, most relationship-based transactions, the basis of friendship and human culture, are non-zero sum.
- **Gamers as competitors:** For many years, game definitions in stuffy text books included clauses that stated games were inherently about competition. The assumption was that people who enjoyed games predominantly enjoyed competition. We know from Nick Yee and company's work that competition as a motivator peaks in young men around 19-20 and then falls off gradually. By age 30, it is one of smaller motivational forces.
- **Gamers are best motivated by extrinsic motivators:** Pop game design sometimes talks about players as coerced robots who respond to automatically to variably reinforced dribbles of extrinsic rewards. Again, these experiments were done on highly stressed out animal subjects. When similar experiments are done on low-stress, happy humans, we get a much wider range of responses; many addictive tendencies go away. In materially and emotionally plentiful environments, rote or self-destructive behavior is replaced by enriching pro-social human behavior.

**Newer models:** Newer models such as Tend and Befriend or Self Determination Theory describe a broader, more diverse set of player behaviors and motivations. We are also realizing that not all people go through life as if they are rats reacting to electric shocks. Contemporary psychology is rediscovering the benefits of rich, contemplative environment that lets humans thrive.

- **Tend and Befriend:** This theory suggests many humans are motivated to bond with one another for safety and strength. We want to spend time preparing together against the uncertain future. We care for those that are weak or injured and find this just as important as hedonistically caring for yourself. These motivations are the exact opposite of dog-eat-dog, fend-for-yourself gameplay.
- **Self determination Theory:** As we covered above, people are intrinsically motivated to pursue Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness. It turns out people are much happier, much more willing to stick around, and much more willing to invest themselves when they aren't coerced via extrinsic rewards.
- **Quantic Foundry's motivation profiles:** After survey over 300,000 game players, this group found six main motivational categories such as Action, Social, Mastery, Achievement, Immersion and Creativity.



					
Action "Boom!"	Social "Let's Play Together"	Mastery "Let Me Think"	Achievement "I Want More"	Immersion "Once Upon a Time"	Creativity "What If?"
<b>Destruction</b> Guns, Explosives, Chaos, Mayhem.	<b>Competition</b> Duels, Matches, High on Ranking.	<b>Challenge</b> Practice, High Difficulty, Challenges.	<b>Completion</b> Get All Collectibles, Complete All Missions.	<b>Fantasy</b> Being someone else, somewhere else.	<b>Design</b> Expression, Customization.
<b>Excitement</b> Fast-Paced, Action, Surprises, Thrills.	<b>Community</b> Being on Team, Chatting, Interacting.	<b>Strategy</b> Thinking Ahead, Making Decisions.	<b>Power</b> Powerful Character, Powerful Equipment.	<b>Story</b> Elaborate plots, Interesting characters.	<b>Discovery</b> Explore, Tinker, Experiment.

Cozy designs are a natural way to address these newly uncovered needs. In particular they seems to do the following:

- Create non-coercive spaces with a strong focus on intrinsic motivations. Not surprisingly cozy games all tend to have extremely strong player agency.
- Allow for players to pursue quieter forms of connectedness and personal mastery.
- From Quantic Foundry's motivations, creativity and completion are served well by a cozy game like Animal Crossing. (<https://quanticfoundry.com/2015/08/11/most-popular-games-by-gaming-motivations/>)

## Increase retention by reducing churn triggers

Players are willing to play beyond satisfying their core motivations. If mechanics fall on a spectrum of motivating to neutral to demotivating, most players will happily enjoy a game compromised of motivating and neutral mechanics. Demotivating mechanics (or aesthetics) are the most likely to disengage players and cause churn. Coziness reduces these drop-off points via an absence of harsh, demanding, and needy motives. These worlds inherently are low stress, low disappointment, and therefore less likely to have explicit churn triggers.

## Improve community relations

Players who seek out comfy games are not usually looking for conflict or stressful interactions. This may seem self evident, but it has a huge impact on community relations. An anecdote sheds some light. Spry Fox ran two games with two very different communities. Realm of the Mad God was a permadeath MMO and Alphabear is a cozy, cute word game. The players in Realm of the Mad God met most typical MMO player stereotypes, with a tendency to become quite angry with both developers and one another. Much of this was due to the structure of the game, which created high stress moments of desperate survival and crushing loss. Alphabear on the other hand was mostly composed of highly literate, polite players who wanted nothing more than to play their game, collect cute bears and share witty comments. There's a simple process at play here:

1. **Mechanics generate emotions:** The game mechanics you design create certain types of player situations that match various motivational needs and in turn trigger emotional reactions.
2. **Emotions attract players:** Players that want specific emotions seek out games that produce them.
3. **Social norms spread:** In multiplayer contexts, players will watch one another and adopt shared social norms based off how people are reacting to the game. If the game tend to encourage anti-

social, high stress behavior that is what players will model.

4. **Developers reap what they sow:** They'll in turn use those same social norms when interacting with the developer.

In short, if you build a high stress game where people are encouraged to act like assholes, you'll get a community of assholes who think that it is entirely normal to abuse others, including the developer of their favorite game. If you build a safe environment that actively promotes prosocial behavior, your community will be much more pleasant. Players of cozy games likely score highly on conscientiousness and agreeableness. Cozy games attract nice people. **The Sad Exception of The Sims Online:** The Sims Online was a potentially cozy game dominated by a community of sociopaths. Thematically, it had elements of coziness with pleasant house in friendly neighborhoods. However, these went only skin deep. In an attempt to make a 'realistic' simulation, many resources including housing were zero sum in nature. This enabled mafia-esque gangs to enforce coercive social structures like protection rackets. Very quickly the place became anti-cozy; a virtual dystopia. Coziness needs to exist at the systems level in order to have social ramifications.

### 3. General Cozy Design Principles

We've discussed what cozy games are and why you might want to build them. Now we'll cover design tools that help you build them. These high level principles provide direction and framing for designing a cozy or cozier game.

#### Cozy is an adjective

As you approach cozy design, remember that coziness is an aesthetic goal, a flavor that can be applied to any underlying type of game. Some mechanics are emotionally more in tune with coziness, but any game can be made more cozy. This also means that there is no single defining genre that is "coziness". (We have a whole chapter below about integrating cozy moments into traditionally non-cozy genres.)

#### Coziness is player dependent

Coziness depends on where the player is coming from when they interact with your game. You can encourage coziness, but you can't force it on a player.

- The coziest space will not feel cozy if a player enters it with pressing external needs. For example, a violently angry teen may find a little village full of happy birds infuriating since it does nothing for their need to exert force
- A cozy social structure can still be hostile if players want to engage in a conflicting forms of expression. For example, a player who sees their universe as inherently about competition may find a game with meditative gardening oppressive or boring.

Cozy design become less about forcing an ideal utopian state and more about facilitating these feelings as best as possible given a wide spread of player motivations and emotional states.

#### Coziness thrives on authenticity

The closer coziness gets to a real world situation with real people and honest human pleasures, the stronger the impact. A real mug of tea is cozier than an image of a mug of tea. Real safety is cozier than reading about someone who is safe. Digital games face a number of challenges here. It will be quite some time before we gain the tactile or olfactory feedback often associated with cozy objects and situations; the warmth of the coffee, the spray of the ocean, the sweet texture of a fresh-picked raspberry, the touch of

crisp sheets in a warm bed in a cool room. Yet there are numerous areas where games can still be authentic.

- In multiplayer games, you are in fact interacting with real humans and you can build real relationships with them.
- Opportunities for introspection lead to real personal insight.
- Complex leadership or organizational skills can transfer to other real world situations.

So games do some pieces of coziness well and others poorly. Focus on their strengths.

## 4. Patterns of Cozy Aesthetics

Once we get past the general tips for designing coziness, there are a number of highly specific design patterns for each domain of game design. Over the following sections, we'll cover aesthetics, content, mechanics, character, narrative and social system. **What are cozy aesthetics?** For the first sub-topic we'll tackle how the aesthetics (visual, audio and/or tactile output) of a game element can create a feeling of coziness that is separate from (and therefore may be improved or reduced by) gameplay. Most cozy aesthetic elements are sensory cues tha:

- Are familiar to the player due to past experience, nostalgic or shared cultural language.
- Intentionally evoke images of safety, softness, and contentedness.
- Often contrast a shared refuge from a less pleasant external environment.

Historically, aesthetics of safety and softness have been marketed towards children, but cozy sensory cues can be more powerful for adults. Memories are like batteries of emotion. Over decades of living, an adult builds a rich history with otherwise mundane objects and environments, storing away personal and cultural meaning. Like the other elements of coziness, these aesthetics may be applied either across an entire game or within a non-cozy game as a "pocket" of aesthetic coziness. Cozy moments in any game can help reset or reframe the player's mindset, as exemplified by the visuals and music of the game resume sequence in *Stardew Valley* (argued by [Jeff Ramos of Polygon](#) to be a key element in the game's pastoral fantasy). Ingredients of cozy aesthetics:

- **Abundance:** Although visual or audio "clutter" is not recommended, a theme of plenty and generousness assists in player calm and security. Visually, providing evidence of an abundance of food, drink, joy, and/or warmth is common in cozy spaces across games such as in taverns, kitchens, cafes, and bedrooms.



*Dragon's Crown offers cozy cooking with an abundance of ingredients*

- **Smooth Transitions:** Gentle gradients between states, colors, or environments within the cozy area. Thresholds, however, between cozy & uncomfortable or even dangerous spaces may be more satisfying if distinct when seen and/or crossed, such as coming in from a snowstorm into a log cabin, or ducking into a cave behind a waterfall.





*Hearthstone offers the metaphor of a small, carved wooden box from which you play the game, with smooth transitions between different play modes.*

- **Protection & Support:** Clear signals of strong safety and comfort, from the environment and characters around the player, signal that this is a safe place in which to explore higher-order needs. For example, a dog or cat that is soundly asleep or a guardian character that is relaxing indicates no danger is present, even outside the player's senses.



*Undertale uses warm tones, focused interiors, and the presence of a relaxed guardian character to indicate this space is safe and cozy.*

- **Focus:** Elimination of interruptions, pressures or sources of unwanted distraction, allows the player to feel a place is knowable and thereby becomes familiar and comfortable. In visual terms, this means a sense of enclosure and intimate framing. It is highly likely that “interior” spaces in early role-playing games eliminated exteriors for technological restrictions, but this focus continues to be used in modern cozy games, from *Animal Crossing* to *Terraria*.



*The Zelda series often offers cozy house interiors, literally blocking any sense of an outside world that could interfere.*

- **Mundanity:** A fundamentally familiar and knowable setting or place will be cozier than the unfamiliar, alien, exotic, or fantastical, if only because it takes longer for the player to ascertain if the space offers true safety and abundance. Hammocks, tea rooms, and pantries, for example, are cozier than otherwise-beautiful and enclosed locations like palaces, zoos, or penthouse suites.
- **Refuge & Escape:** if there *is* an “outside” to this space, it is contrasted in its discomfort or danger. Shelters from storms, roofs from rain or harsh sun, or even a garden inside a bustling city make a place of everyday self-care.



*One of the earliest promotional images of Hyper Light Drifter are of the drifter relaxing next to a campfire while monsters look on. The eyes at a distance make the fire feel even cozier.*

- **Human-centric:** The comfort and ease of humans in this space or system is apparent. The scale of the objects, architecture, and other creatures are comfortable for humans. Things which are too small or too large intrude on coziness with feelings of unbelonging, claustrophobia or agoraphobia.



*Terraria's room requirements and mechanics encourage cozy placements of lighting and doors to keep out threats and protect allies.*

- **Welcome:** When the player is explicitly positioned as a welcomed entity, this gives them the freedom and safety to express themselves. This welcome does not imply responsibility or pressure on them as a hero or other job to perform, but rather welcomes them as a person, to join whatever activities are available, or to be alone, as they wish. Bartenders often greet newcomers with a welcome, whether the tavern is digital or physical, to encourage a longer and more leisurely visit.
- **Seasons:** The visual passing of seasons is heavily connoted with coziness in their familiarity and rituals, often of community and abundance. Autumn and winter are especially rich in potential, with a good harvest and refuge from cold weather causing potential any interior space to become cozy.
- **Ritual:** Facilitating repeated, meaningful actions can create familiarity and contentedness.



*Harvest Moon was a popular cozy title that offered a mundane, ritual refuge in pastoral life, with clearly demarcated seasons to signify both economic and community activities.*

## Cozy Visuals

Cozy visuals include:

- **Colors:** Warm, gentle color palette (yellows, oranges), without high-intensity contrast or hues.
- **Light:** Warm-toned lighting of clear origin and low ambient, which allows for soft shadows. If the source of light is intense, such as the sun, bright lamp or stoked fire, it's best to soften the beams in some way (i.e. dappled, partially obscured, or gently shaded).



*The Witcher 3 uses warm, yellow tones in its lighting and materials to make their taverns feel even more welcoming.*

- **Natural materials:** wood, stone, fur, moss, cotton, wool, water, living plants. These materials are familiar, implying either sturdy, ancestral safety or physical comfort. These materials can be harder to find in science fiction worlds, making them more likely to feel sterile, unwelcoming, and uncomfortable. Hand-made materials and rustic objects, which imply they were crafted and/or preserved with care and attention.



*Yoshi's Woolly World makes the entire world feel touchable, soft, and lovingly crafted.*

- **Space:** Closer, intimate, more enclosed spaces. Outdoor spaces should obscure the distant horizon partially in some way, through geometry, fog, or darkness.
- **Contrast:** Ideally, provide a window or reminder of an external non-cozy space you are taking refuge from, such as rain, snow, etc.



*What Remains of Edith Finch offers many intimate spaces to explore, but none so cozy as the sun-dappled grandmother's room, with evidence of leisure time and abundance.*

## Cozy Audio



Cozy audio is continuous, soft, and non-intrusive, with an element of familiarity. The sources of both music and audio should ideally be diegetic to allow the players to connect concretely or even intimately with those sources. **Music**

- Ambient, possibly dynamic or gently unpredictable. Ex. Playstation background music, jazz.
- Gentle acoustic, organic/human-centered music - score and performance
- Humanity in music can also be increased through small, subtle imperfections, such as recorded aspirations, fingering mistakes, etc.

## Sound

- Any hint of external threat or danger should be muted and distant
- Ideally all sounds should have an identifiable concrete, diegetic source.
- Waterfall, rivers, rain
- Gentle fire
- Cat purring
- Indistinct chatter
- Non-violent storms
- (Controversial/taste-based) ASMR
- White noise can be used to help with difficulty sleeping, as the varying texture 'washes out' individual noises and becomes easily ignored. This effect can also be achieved by steady hums or noises, such as from fans or machinery.

## Cozy locations

Cozy locations are centered on leisure, practicality, ritual, history, and familiarity. Cozy content allows for privacy and creative expression, physically dividing spaces into nooks and alcoves and providing means for people to spend companionable, low-intensity time with others or in solitude. It can be helpful to also reference historical or other deeply familiar touchstones, to make the space more immediately knowable. Places where players can decorate can become cozy as it suits the player's taste and expression, and players may seek out cozy environments as a way of changing pace in contrast to more demanding environments. Cozy place examples:

- Sociable yet private, discrete 3rd spaces separate from responsibility or 'work': bars, cafes, retreats, libraries, cabins, gardens
- Transition spaces without danger or obligation: trains, backseat of a car, slow-moving spacecraft
- Unpretentious community gathering & ritual spaces: farmer's markets, kitchens, chapels
- Places that fill basic needs, including food, rest, warmth, and opt-in sociability. They should include visible places to comfortably sit, eat, drink, and view beauty.
- Places that support low-demand companionship, such as those with calm pets, or passive NPC-watching.
- Spaces can become cozy once danger is no longer present: an arena where a boss fight used to be can become a cozy playground for celebration and bonding, or a cozy environment can be a goal for exploring part of a map.

Places with enclosed, strongly seasonal identities will also evoke coziness

- **Autumn coziness:** warm color palettes, warm food/drink, family/holiday traditions, and soft materials, such as in Lieve Oma <https://vltnn.itch.io/lieve-oma>
- **Winter coziness:** muffling snow, beautiful mountains (outside), family/holiday traditions, gifts, and soft materials.
- **Spring coziness:** blossoming gardens, romantic traditions, nurturing baby animals
- **Summer coziness:** cooling in the shade, ocean waves, iced treats

## Cozy items



Cozy items are those found in cozy spaces or that are used to perform cozy activities

- Hobby or “crafty” leisure items: Fishing rod, books, gathering baskets, mechanical keyboard, cooking tools, cut flowers, wooden blocks, walking sticks
- Physically comforting items: Quilts, blankets, socks, tea sets, rocking chairs
- Food and drink themselves can be cozy: a frothy mug of beer is more cozy than a alchemical potion; items that can be shared or suggest plenty (a slice of cake, a bunch of grapes, sacks of flour) reinforce a sense of sharing, abundance, and generosity
- Things that are cute but low-intensity can be cozy: elaborate costumes and skins may be too laden with status or opulence, but simpler or understated styles can feel less threatening or attention-seeking.
- Even cold and hard objects (typewriters, tea sets) can invoke cozy feelings of intimacy or nostalgia, if lovingly hand-crafted (“artisanal”) or loaded with familial or historical meaning.
- Domestic objects can signal coziness, the more mundane the better: wagons, mailboxes, a porch swing, a pair of boots, a raincoat.

## 5. Patterns of Cozy Mechanics

Beneath the aesthetics of a game, its underlying mechanics may seem at first neutral or benign with regard to coziness. However, a fundamental mechanic or motivation can engender a positive or negative sense of coziness, and contribute to the overall tone and feel of the game.

### Intrinsically rewarding activities

For something to be cozy, it has to be, in and of itself, satisfying -- not satisfying because it contributes to some other purpose. When the reward of an activity outweighs its gentle momentary pleasure, the activity can become extrinsic and lose its cozy appeal. Compulsory mechanics often detract from a game's coziness. Since coziness is an opt-in affordance, any player activity driven by extrinsic motivation - either as requisite responsibility or threat-response, or as an artificial reward - tends to evoke an un-cozy experience.

- In Animal Crossing, the sounds of shaking trees to get fruit is inherently pleasurable even after thousands of repetitions.
- In Zelda, the cooking process of tossing the ingredients in the hot pot and waiting to see if they'll be a success is inherently pleasant.

### Breadth of optional activities

The cozy experience depends on high player agency. You need to chose to do a task of your own volition. Giving players a wide number of possible tasks and then not forcing them to do any of them lets them take responsibility for their actions. Examples

- In Animal Crossing: New Leaf there are numerous activities such as fishing, decorating, gardening, clothing creation, fetch quests, etc. But all of these can be ignored with no ill results. The same pattern is used in Stardew Valley and Harvest Moon.
- We see something similar in less cozy games like Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Cozy activities are harvesting and cooking are never required to progress.
- In Destiny 2, there's a soccer ball just sitting there. If you kick it into a goal, a scoreboard increments. But nothing tells you to play soccer. There's no official start or stop to a match. This ends up being a cozy moment of opt-in social fun.

## Safe rituals

Some player activities can achieve a sense of coziness due to their familiarity. Repeated low risk tasks allow the player to relax.

- **Safe:** The activity is known to be safe and will not cause stress or danger.
- **Known:** The activity is constrained. It will not suddenly eat up an unexpected amount of time, labor or resources.
- **Relaxed:** The activity is low mental cost. It occupies the hands, but frees the mind to work on other more subtle concerns.

### Examples

- A mundane act of organization or tidying
- A walk down a familiar path.
- Searching or collecting for diamonds, berries or fossils -- though not under duress.
- Even a busy environment or activity, if exceedingly familiar, can provide a sense of coziness. Like the ritual of going to a gently buzzing coffee shop to write.
- For some players, a self-appointed task -- harvest and replant the crops -- can be relaxing in a safe, soft, and satisfying way.

There are many mundane objects from the cozy items list above are associated with low risk activities.

- Fishing with a fishing rod
- Reading a book
- Putting on cozy socks (and wiggling your toes)
- Bundling up in a quilt your mother made you. Or sewing a quilt for a child you love.
- Brewing tea in a chipped tea set given to you by your grandmother.
- Drinking steaming coffee from that strange handcrafted mug you got visiting your aunt in Maine.
- Typing on a clacky typewriter in a warm wood paneled study (with flakes of snow outside)

## The challenge of emergent extrinsic rewards

Some mechanics may start off as cozy, but later become reduced or compromised as players acclimate to gameplay systems and (consciously or subconsciously) seek to min/max them. A quaint trading bazaar or relaxing spawn point in an MMO can rapidly lose its charm as players queue up for their turn at an activity, exchanging intimate intrinsic experiential rewards for (ultimately shallow) extrinsic payouts. We recommend tracking player behavior and identifying when extrinsic rewards start to take over. Often a simple obfuscation of feedback is enough to dampen the feedback loop. If that doesn't work, take a look at the economic rewards and balance them such that comfier behavior dominates.

## The challenge of cozy monetization

**Coziness can be weaponized.** Because it establishes intimacy and vulnerability, it can be used to lower barriers to purchase. For example, a timeshare sales process offers a participant a free meal or cash reward in an comfy, gorgeous setting. In return, they leverage this atmosphere of generosity to encourage the mark to complete the reciprocation loop and purchase a very expensive timeshare. **Many standard monetization practices damage coziness.** Social comparison creates social anxiety for some players. Time pressure on sales and event generates a fear of missing out. Heavily promoted item rarity makes players feel a strong sense of scarcity. The best practice here is twofold

- **Service existing needs.** If you can, sell products within the game that address real existing player needs. You'll be selling something that results in a meaningful addition to the player's life outside the game. Minimize artificially generating needs and then cynically making merchandise to fill that need.

Don't be the doctor who poisons their patient and then sells them the cure.

- **Balance for honesty and coziness.** Some scarcity and social comparison is okay if done in moderation. It can provide contrast to other cozy elements. Tom Nook in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* traffics in most of the crass aspects of capitalism. Yet because he is an opt-in component of a much larger game, it ends up being okay. When *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* makes this experience the whole game, coziness is lost.

## 6. Patterns of Cozy Narrative

### Ambient Narratives

When coziness is the central mode of a game's narrative, it tends to exhibit certain qualities:

- Low-pressure - Even if the stakes are high, anxiety is low.
- Low-intensity - Cozy stories unfold at a pace of the player's choosing with little urgency.
- Ensemble - Stories of a "chosen one" that emphasize the exceptionalism of the player are at odds with authenticity.
- Non-violent - Conflicts are ephemeral and a path to understanding.
- Intimate - A moderate size number of players to build familiarity
- Down-to-earth - Humble and grounded. Find wonder and contentment in the familiar.
- Emphasis on ritual - seasons, holidays, day/night, harvest cycles. Stories that lazily drift along the river of time
- Episodic - The sum of experiences is greater than any one story



*The Atelier games frame the fantasy around career, community, and cozy objects/spaces*

### Intermezzo Narratives

Intermezzo refers to a musical score that occurs *between* other major musical movements. Coziness can also offer respite in an otherwise intense narrative:

- Safety in the storm - Dark Souls campfire
- The calm before the storm - Ellie's guitar or giraffes in *The Last of Us*
- A place to call home - The private rooms of the Normandy in *Mass Effect*
- Denouement -after needs are met, climax achieved, explicit opt-in room to relax and "do nothing"

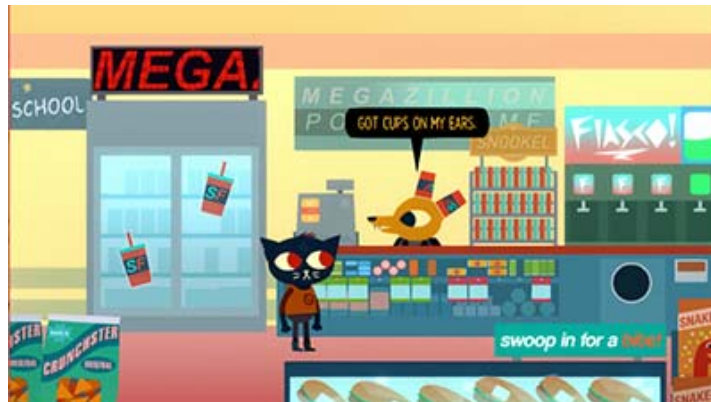


Dragon Age: *Companions take time to reflect and unwind after adventures.*

## Cozy narrative archetypes

We see common narrative patterns show up repeatedly.

- “It Takes a Village” - Communities banding together for the common good
- “Homecoming” - A return to familiar faces and a gentle reflection on time
- “Immigrant’s Story” - Starting a new life in a new place with a fresh start
- “Pastoral Escape” - Consciously choosing to leave the troubles of modern life for something simpler
- “Honest Labor” - the celebration of dedication to a craft
- “After Hours” - A focus on the small moments and relationships that happen in between work and adversity



Night in the Woods: *Narrative leans into cozy tropes to explore complex themes*

## 7. Patterns of cozy characters

Non-player characters in a cozy game should exemplify or facilitate the cozy virtues of safety, softness and satisfied needs. This can manifest through the character’s role, their aesthetics, and the affordances of interaction offered the player.

### Tend and befriend

Cozy characters embody the tend and befriend response, offering players a support and respite from outside stress. They are often nurturers, providing affection, shelter, food, companionship, and acceptance. More simply, characters reassure the player that they are loved. This can manifest with roles traditionally associated with cozy places - bartenders, innkeepers, librarians, farmers, grandmothers,



spouse, etc. They can do the heavy lifting of emotional labor for the player. Cozy characters can assist the player in her goals. The coziness of these gestures is amplified when the acts are non-transactional. In the cozy fantasy, we help each other because it is the *nice* thing to do. Favors and gifts are cozy; obligation and neediness are not. Characters might be designed to be recipients of nurturing gestures by the player. Taken to the extreme, this can include literal pets or characters who fulfill the same function of a pet, whose function in the game world is to be adopted and cared for. Conversely, curmudgeons and even pariahs have an important place in cozy games, offering the player the ability to signal empathy. These antisocial characters give a community authenticity; like a patchwork quilt, mismatched scraps add to the charm. Examples:

- Ignis in Final Fantasy XV taking pride and pleasure in cooking for the party
- Characters in Stardew Valley sending you recipes in the mail to show gratitude
- Cranky villagers in Animal Crossing keeping things grounded



*FFXV's companions are confident in what they bring to the team and look out for each other.*

## Intimacy, authenticity and autonomy

Within a cozy space, character interactions should allow for vulnerability and intimacy. The intrinsic reward for engaging with cozy characters is a sense of belonging in the community, possibly, but not necessarily, building to friendship or romance. Gestures of trust, like sharing a secret or inviting a player into a private space, are especially powerful at making the player feel welcome. In crafting cozy characters, authenticity is more important than complexity. Simple interactions should reinforce that the characters have their own inner lives separate from the player's agenda. Brevity is a virtue as it puts less pressure on the player to know everything about a character. Cozy relationships are founded on consent. What makes grumpy characters tolerable and even charming is the opt-in nature of engaging with them. It is comforting to know that within a community, life goes on independent of the player's agency. Examples:

- Going out for Ramen with Ryuji in Persona 5
- KK Slider passing through town
- Oscar the Grouch



*Persona 5 builds intimacy with its cast through mundane activities.*



## Visual character design

Characters can leverage cozy aesthetics, much like places.

- Posture and animations that emphasize relaxation and contentment can model a cozy mood.
- A soothing voice, like that of Bob Ross, can put the player at ease.
- Soft and cuddly appearance that invites hugging, like a Totoro

Cozy context allows otherwise threatening authority figures, like a boss, a cop, or royalty, to expose their humanity. Anyone from a criminal, to a demon, to a king to a town drunk can be cozy when they let their guard down. Coziness is a shortcut to empathy.



*In Howl's Moving Castle, Calcifer is grumpy, judgmental, and initially fearsome, but moments of vulnerability make him a beloved member of the household.*

## 8. Patterns of cozy social mechanics

One of the key higher-level needs is forming connections with others. While NPCs do offer an avenue for players to practice forming relationships, our current weak simulations will never replace real relationships with real people. For this, we need to examine the cozy systems of multiplayer games.

### Challenge of cozy interactions online

Virtual environments present unique challenges to the facilitation of coziness. Online is arguably inherently dehumanizing.

- **Strangers:** Due to the logistical challenges of getting friends together in the same time, place and game, online game players tend to be strangers. We don't know or trust most strangers and are generally act in a guarded fashion around them. This immediately puts safety on the back burner.
- **Lack of persistent identity:** When players know they'll never see another person again, they may lower their inhibitions to pushing the spatial, moral, or legal boundaries of others. You need to build robustly pro-social systems or else players immediately devolve into a Lord of the Flies-style wasteland of griefers and populist mobs. Witness Twitter.
- **Low bandwidth communication:** Most of the information present in real-world human interaction is either inaccurate or simply not simulated in games. Facial expressions, tone of voice, even conversational pacing is lost. Troublesome behavior like insincerity, perceived or real, ruin the coziness of a player's experience.

### Use cozy norms to attract a better community

The current dominant multiplayer design pattern uses limited resources, high stakes, and hazardous worlds to drive competitive behavior between players. The optimal strategy in these environments is to see other

strangers as enemies who must be avoided or destroyed. It is a recapitulation of Fight or Flight motivations. The cozy alternative is to implement abundance, safety, and reprieve to foster cooperative and trustful interactions. The resulting pro-social environment can shift players attitudes positively towards other players. Instead of destruction, we signal mutual support. Instead of othering, we showcase the formation of coherent social groups. You'll see these steps occur:

- The game promotes social norms that promise and encourage trust.
- This results in fewer failed reciprocation loops. Players let their guard down.
- Players that reciprocate tend to escalate the depth of their relationship.
- Over time, comfy spaces yield stronger friendships.

**Social norms to aim for:** When designing a cozy community, ask yourself what social systems and signals you've put in place that encourage the following community norms. Focus on the positive things you can do vs the things you shouldn't do.

- **Politeness:** We are nice to one another.
- **Consent:** Ask for consent. It is okay if someone opts out.
- **Help one another:** If someone needs help, the community will lend a hand.
- **Protection from threat:** If there's a threat, the community is a safe haven.
- **Emotional support:** Sometimes people have a bad day. The community is willing to lend a shoulder to cry on.
- **Celebration of relationships:** It is wonderful when people meet and wonderful when they become better friends. The community supports this.
- **Mend, Don't End:** People make mistakes, sometimes people get hurt. As a community we will try to mend things when we get upset.

**Tools for creating norms:** There are systems worth adding to facilitate social norms. You don't need to just accept what the community brings. You can shape it.

- **Code of conduct:** Get players to agree to how you want them to behave in the game. This works.
- **Feedback systems that immediately target a behavior:** Make systems that target a behavior, not ones that label a person as bad, evil or ruined. Reputation flags or banservers end up creating culture where bad behavior is acceptable. Instead, notify players in a timely fashion that they've done something against the norms and let them know what the infraction was and how they might improve.
- **Gameplay scenarios that enforce norms:** If being generous is a goal, create quests that result in being generous to others. There's a risk with use overly strong extrinsic rewards, but simply signposting the activity is often enough.

**Beware of importing norms:** Often you'll import arbitrary norms from the default culture and these can accidentally poison the cozy atmosphere. There are many of these related to gender, race, age and class. Even traditions such as RPG Alignments can be problematic. For example, in D&D it is possible to have a Chaotic Evil character. But when that player roleplays that norm, the rest of the community suffers. **Note on cozy in competitive games:** While online competitive games can hurt friendship formation, there's still room in team-based games for cozy moments. Think about creating warm and welcoming spaces for the team members when they aren't fighting. Give them a place to work on deepening their relationships with one another.

## Escalating layers of opt-in interactions

Permission setting is perhaps the most important tool for prevent a social coziness calamity. It is too easy to accidentally for someone for force communication on another person, holding them hostage to an interaction they don't desire.

- **Call and Response interactions:** A player chooses to broadcast a no-pressure initiation to a group (best if larger than one other person). Other players can choose to acknowledge the call and respond,

but are not burdened with expectation.

- **Layers of Investment:** In this “Social Onion” model for permission setting, a player starts at a level of non-interaction. At their own discretion, the player may then opt-in to increasingly risky layers of interaction with individuals or the public one layer at a time.
- **1 on 1 interactions can come later:** There is an obligation of both attention and intimacy that occurs in a 1 on 1 social situation. Even the act of listening is a form of emotional labor. You may want to structure your comfy interactions so this is optional and only the default for people who have opted into a higher engagement relationship (such as declaring mutual friendship).
- **Use invitations to escalate a relationship:** Demand and requests can generate an unpleasant obligation to respond. Create ways for players to kindly invite another person to a space or activity. This is a very warm and welcoming opening and creates a safe opportunity to opt-out. Group invites are good for new relationships. Individual invites are good for medium to high intimacy relationships.
- **Small cooperative groups can facilitate escalation:** Encourage dense, frequent interactions between small groups of players. By forming players into persistent cohorts (via guilds or matchmaking) players will bump into one another regularly when they play. This incrementally creates familiarity, recognition, sense of shared experience (all cozy factors). Some members of the group will naturally opt-in to deep relationships.
- **Opt-in permissive communication channels:** Trust comes late in a relationship. As a result early transgressive humor can be quite hurtful. But later, once players know one another, humor becomes a signal of trust. We can joke and be silly and not be censored. We can share intimate and scary details about ourselves without risk of rejection. So where early communication methods are locked down, small group or friend-to-friend channels need to be more permissive. Or else cozy trust will not flourish.
- **Blocklists:** When your best attempts at creating mutual opt-in interactions fail, blocking communications is a necessary evil. But it would be preferable to avoid disruptions to the player's experience altogether. Whitelists and de-escalating barriers may be more natural and effective.

For more information, see the previous Project Horseshoe report [\*Game design patterns that facilitate strangers becoming “friends”\*](#)

## Low cost social reciprocity

Low risk social interactions can feel cozy. When you nod to a smiling passerby or wave to a friend, you are fulfilling your social needs in a manner that doesn't take much effort and is unlikely to be rejected. Tools for low cost reciprocity:

- **Positive Emotes:** Have a curated emote system that focuses on positive signals such as smiling or waving. Allow congratulating, nodding in affirmation and encouraging.
- **Grumpy emotes:** Negative emotes are still useful, but you can treat them in a melodramatic cartoon fashion that takes the sting out. A cute little character stomping about is a lot more palatable than one that screams loudly or teabags your avatar.
- **Automate subconscious social interactions.** Characters can turn to face a player as they walk by or tilt their head in acknowledgement. As you get closer, the other avatars can pay more attention. If you talk, other avatars can automatically turn to listen. This mimics what we do in real life.
- **Streamlined UI:** Make the interface for emoting accessible and easy to use. If you bury social verbs in menus, they'll never happen.
- **Signal social context automatically:** For example, a scene can shift to low light intimate colors if two people are chatting but shift to bright colors if lots of people are talking.

Central to all these tools is the design exercise of imagining you exist in a space where you are known and accepted and asking some simple questions:

- What social interactions would occur?
- How can you work those into the animations and communication options for your character?

**Limits to cozy emotes:** If the game mechanics are poisonous, 'nice' emotes can become polluted. Emotes in Hearthstone (a PvP game) on the surface are pleasant, polite interactions. However, the community quickly figured out how to make them into biting insults. For example 'Hello' is used to brag when delivering a particularly deadly combo attack. Also be aware that emotes are good for ritualistic social maintenance, but not for intimate disclosure or deep relationship building. In fact, a superficial emote used on a good friend may feel dismissive.

## Let conversations ramble

Consensual conversation is a naturally high agency, high creativity activity that builds strong social connections. Online communication is often used in games to help players coordinate get things done. But cozy conversation tends to occupy more of a social maintenance space. That is, chatting about nothing in particular with a friend is more cozy than trying to make a decision in a meeting. Create moments or spaces in your game where players can communicate without much emphasis on purpose or meaning.

- Let players linger in rooms or areas where the purpose is fulfilled rather than giving them the boot.
- Have group harvesting or crafting moments where players are engaged enough to stay in the area, but the activity is low intensity enough that they can still chat and follow a conversation.



*Champion Trains in Guild Wars 2*

For example, an unintentionally high-retention activity known as “Champion Trains” emerged in Guild Wars 2 when players complete easy loops of boss monsters to kill repeatedly. There were better rewards elsewhere; but a big draw was casual social interaction with the community. Because these groups are easy to coordinate, chats often featured relatively meaningless and rambling topics.

## Gifting

Gifting is one of the more powerful social signals of abundance and caring. A gift tends to mean the giver's basic needs are met and they want to support others. Gifting is often an intrinsically motivated gesture where it is gauche to expect a gift back. This perceived honesty acts as jet fuel for the reciprocity engine that drives deeper friendships. However, not all gifts are created equal.

- **Person interaction associated with the gift:** Direct interpersonal interactions mixed with small personal gifts are the most cozy. The gift augments the existing warmth in the relationship, but ultimately the face-to-face interactions and long history are the source of meaning.
- **Care delivering the gift:** Gifts become less cozy when they are received by a courier or heaven forbid, a utilitarian menu.
- **Effort sourcing gift:** Gifts also are less cozy if there is little care given in selecting or producing the gift. Social games had buttons where you could spam friends with endlessly duplicated boosters of little value. Players soon learned that these were mostly meaningless. On the other hand, the game Triple Town only gave out gifts if you had scored well in games that could last weeks or months. And

you could only give those gifts to a single person. Each one was precious and valued.

## Safety in numbers

We can create cozy economic situations that encourage players to bond together in order to keep out a hostile world. This technique again taps into tend and befriend psychology. For example, in Everquest, player would settle down around a camping spot to rest and recharge. At any moment a train of high level monsters might smash into the group wreaking havoc. However, the space felt cozy since you were together with other player who you knew would leap to your mutual defense at the appearance of danger. Together, the players feel safe.



Nothing like a little RnR between graveyard zergs.  
*Fishing in PvP zone Alterac Valley in World of Warcraft*

More examples

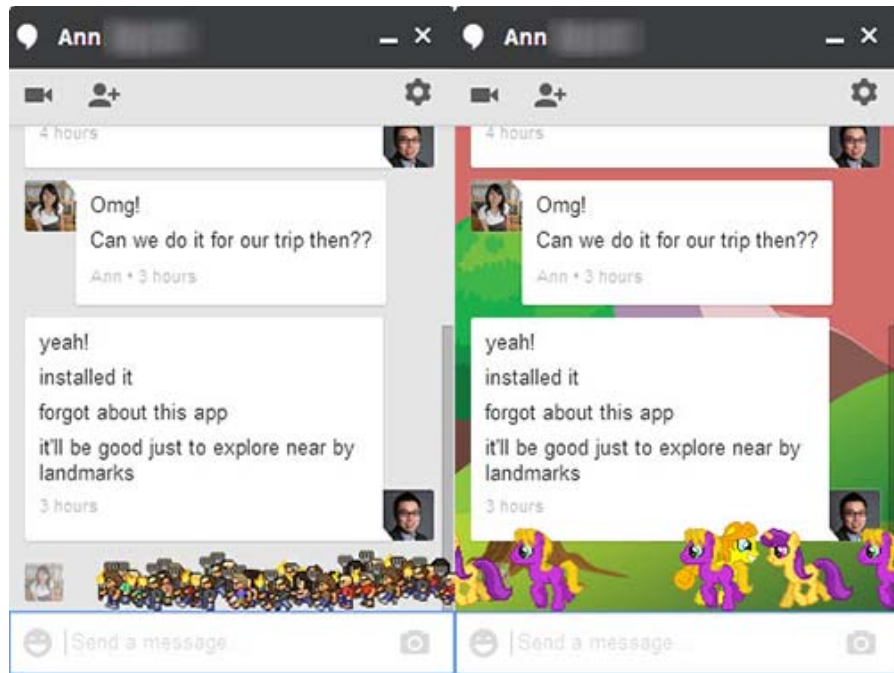
- The comradery of fishing together in the PvP areas of World of Warcraft
- Crafting at the campfire in Don't Starve together during the night.
- Cluster of traders sitting in the dangerous wilderness in Realm of the Mad God

## Use cozy feedback to make up for low social bandwidth

Address the low fidelity level of virtual social interaction head on. Design channels of feedback that help players clarify the context of situations and communications.

- **Trust Heuristics and Settings:** Move beyond binary expressions of trust and permission, such as friend or not friend. Alert players to how they are progressing along multiple dimensions of a potential new relationship, such as common friends, interests or skills. Automatically color a chat room based on how many players are present, or how intimate the chat is.
- **Opt-in to social risk level:** Allow certain levels of automatic permission based on the player's social-risk preferences.
- **Feedback Requests:** Give players a non-threatening method to ask for feedback and find out how they're doing. Private feedback channels allow people to make adjustments without being shamed.
- **Apology Channels** – Offer players the ability to atone for mistakes. Sincerity is key, consider enforcing a delay or an ability to immediately say "I'll think about this" and let the apology come later.





*Google Hangouts experimented with allowing users to collaboratively dress up message windows. Would this change the tone of your conversation?*

## Drawbacks of Social Coziness

### *Forcing cozy causes it to fall apart*

Remember that more isn't always more. Cozy social interaction is a trust-based process and the nature of trust is fickle.

- Trust is earned slowly and then quickly lost, often collapsing relationships when it all falls apart.
- Vulnerability is difficult enough to reach in the real world and it may take longer to reach that state in an online game.
- Some players may simply be wary or incapable of forming cozy virtual connections with others.

### *When There's Comfort in Solitude*

Games that facilitate a high degree of social coziness run the risk of eventually isolating players from one another. As players form deeper relationships and tightly-knit groups, they may lose a sense of that game's greater community as a whole. In some cases, various gaming communities are so cozy that they've grown indifferent or hostile to newcomers and outsiders. Monitor the density of your game's population carefully, and be sure to facilitate new connections between players.

## Looking Ahead: More Sofas, Less Lobbies

Outlook on the future of social game interactions should be optimistic. Anecdotes of poor behavior that pollute the online gaming space may (at least in part) be a case of how function follows form. Though initially useful for clarity, many conventions of online spaces and interfaces are aging poorly. As audiences become more sophisticated, so too should the mechanics by which they interact online. Coziness can be a useful evaluation lens on how a social mechanic might be upgraded or replaced. For example, the term "lobby" is often used in gaming to describe the pre-game flow of activity. Consider what types of interactions you've had with other people in lobbies. Now decide if that's really how people should meet and interact in your game. This is applicable to developers of cozy worlds and perhaps doubly-so for

developers looking to build social retention into any type of game.



*The developers of Halo 2 re-imagined the matchmaking lobby as a virtual sofa. At the time, staying with the same group from match to match was a big innovation. A very cozy move for a decidedly un-cozy game.*

## 9. Augmenting Non-cozy Games

You don't need to make your entire game uniformly cozy to gain the benefits of cozy design. Many traditional games satisfy cozy needs by including separate, safe cozy spaces. Here are several patterns you can use to integrate coziness into your game.

### A refuge in an otherwise intense game

Think of creating a cozy sandwich for your high stress game. On the inside are the meaty moments of action. And on the outside are comforting moments of coziness.



*The cozy sandwich*

In the hardcore hit Dark Souls, gameplay is built around an accumulation of stress. The further you are from the safety of a previous bonfire (save point), the more at-risk you are for permanently losing your accumulated resources. This is not cozy. Yet, the bonfire locations in Dark Souls manages to have several cozy qualities:

- They remove all immediate danger (no monsters, no aggro overlap with something outside the space,

no dangerous surfaces), which gives a moment of **safety** to an otherwise intense and dangerous game

- They provide an ability to spend your currency, lessening the risk of losing it, which also ties to **safety** (no impending loss or threat)
- The audio, lighting, and level design feedback is leveraged to create an intimate space with soothing qualities (the crackling of the fire, the lessening or elimination of intense sounds, the warm glow of the fire, the closeness of walls). These are linked to the quality of **softness** by providing comforting feedback and an opportunity of a lowered state of arousal.
- The bonfire also by giving you access to your storage, offering **abundance** of resources when the more frequent gameplay experience of adventuring features resource scarcity (limited pockets, stack limits). There's a moment for tinkering and rearranging.

These cozy qualities improve pacing throughout the game, and form the basis of the central loop of the game:

1. **Desire**: You start in a place of safety, but also suffer from scarcity.
2. **Adventure**: Motivated by your lack of resources and a need to progress, you move further into danger, collect more vulnerable resources, and overcome a large risky obstacle.
3. **Respite**: Finally, you set your burden down to reset the loop and save your progress. This is the moment of coziness.

This loop keeps the game digestible and the wins incremental and continuous rather than one large all-or-nothing encounter.

## Persistent small groups in multiplayer games

Call of Duty (among other games) will team up the player with a small group of other player and persist that group throughout matches. This social structure has several cozy qualities, but the specifics of the group makeup could make that grouping feel more or less cozy.

- Spending continual time together with a set of shared goals promotes **familiarity** and **reliability** between the participants.
- The matchmaking process is **opt-in**, so these connections aren't thrust upon you in an uncomfortable way. You can always opt out if the situation starts to feel emotionally unsafe.
- These shared experiences with a more intimate might open conversation and expression possibilities inappropriate for a more open, anonymous venue. This freedom ties to one's **ability to be vulnerable and expressive without negative ramification**. Obviously, if the group is hostile toward these overtures, then this potential breaks down.

Though the game might feel inherently non-cozy, these moments of social coziness help to form lasting bonds and promote strangers to more meaningful relationships where deeper communication and social safety exists.

## Build cozy connections with non-player characters

Characters can also function a cozy moments in otherwise non-cozy games. This satisfies the need to connect with others in a safe fashion. Cozy NPCs are often facilitators, and can be connected to cozy locations. Here are some examples: **Ness' dad and mom (Earthbound)**



The act of saving in many games usually asks the player to pause for a moment, and in this case, that opportunity is taken to deepen your relationship with your father, get some hints, and sometimes even get a few bucks in your account. This interaction features **softness**, where intimacy of emotion is a break from the moments of combat or other exploration pressures. **Shopkeepers in River City Ransom**



The shopkeeper experience in River City Ransom achieves multiple cozy objectives. The cities (where these often appear) are **safe** and free from opponents, and the shop itself gives a tiny window into a **confined**, cozy scene between the player and the vendor. The 'free smile' has no gameplay progression implications other than to reinforce the safe nature of this space. This type of space (and other shops) provides a loop closure that forms the backbone of integral gameplay systems (currency acquisition, ability expansion). The cozy qualities of this space afford the player a moment of respite from the compulsions of the other gameplay spaces. **Shopkeeper in The Legend of Zelda**



This shares some elements with the River City Ransom shop, but this shop allows the player free movement in a safe space. There is a break in the music, signaling a shift from gameplay to rest space. The walls are closer in than a normal screen, providing an **intimacy of space**, the colors are warm, and there are bonfires to contribute to the warmth of the space despite the low resolution of the scene. **Chef in Odin Sphere**



*Moments of character advancement are slowed down for Odin Sphere, and the focus becomes on the act of preparing and consuming food.*

**Bastion/Stanley Parable narrators** These characters form a comforting backdrop during the play experience. In Bastion, though the character is fighting and in a high state of arousal, the narrator exudes a calming voice, and has authentic and human qualities that help form a cozy connection throughout the game session. By the end of the game, the character is familiar and the relationship between him and the player is substantial.

## 10. Cozy Development Practices

We've been talking about building cozy games, but cozy practices can also be applied to the *process* of building a game. Or for that matter running any company. A cozy environment tends to have the following benefits:

- Emotional safety leads to honest communication and genuine collaboration.
- Abundance leads to a willingness to experiment without fear of loss.
- Retention of key personnel. Many developers prefer being in a cozy space, or having access to one. Once you've experienced a cozy workplace, it is hard to leave.



## Foundations: Consent and social norms

How your development team operates depends in large part on the social norms you've established. Consider:

- What social norms does your team hold?
- How are they established, reinforced and signaled in your team?

Many cozy practices are easy to implement if you are clear in the beginning about what's acceptable. You need to structure and establish boundaries. Consider working with your team to create genuine, sincere codes of conduct or value statements. Be sure to include the following cozy concepts:

- **Abundance:** What are your clear structures of support if something bad happens?
- **Safe consent:** How can employees opt-in (or opt-out) of risky opportunities?
- **Softness:** How do you create quiet spaces for social connection and self improvement?

## Cozy spaces and environments

**A space for each type of task:** Collaborative design work can be held more effectively in smaller or enclosed spaces. Are your 1:1s held in rooms where both participants feel comfortable and can trust that their conversation is private? Are teams able to take conversations to separate areas where there is less outside noise or bother? Coziness can be tricky to implement in a workspace, however. Too small a space can be intimidating or claustrophobic, and dim lights can just make it hard to function. It may also be unwelcome if the designer is not yet ready for higher-level work and needs to pursue needs for safety, hunger, thirst, and/or sleep. **Opportunities to escape to a cozy spot:** Allowing individuals to choose to go to a cozy environment when desired -- say, for brainstorming on an interesting new possibility -- can help people offer, develop, and exchange ideas when they otherwise might be drowned out. For example, Daniel Cook has a coffee shop he escapes to whenever he needs to do writing.

- There is food and coffee which removes any hunger or thirst.
- The baristas know his name and (most of them) smile when he walks in. This is a space of safe social connection.
- In the back of the shop is a quiet area with a warm, bright fireplace.
- The decor is dark wood and stone with light music trickling in from the front room.
- Outside, it is often raining gently. Or it is gloriously sunny. Or the fall leaves just take your breath away.
- No one tells him to go. No one tells him to leave. Writing in the cafe is both a opt-in choice and a comforting ritual he's been doing for years.

**Cozy time:** Time can also carry aspects of coziness. Some creative folks give themselves guaranteed unstructured time when they aren't available for meetings or aren't working on anything specific, which allows for reflection, inspiration or even just feeling unpressured for a spell. Unscheduled time and personal projects can reap the benefits of coziness as a person's mind finally has permission to open up and consider new possibilities.

## Crunch is not cozy

Consider the extent to which we encourage people to volunteer for extra work, and how such volunteerism is actually pressured. Crunch can result from extrinsic social pressure. Or an internal creative drive. Both still contribute to burnout, increased bug counts, and frustration. When it happens, burnout explicitly blocks coziness since exhaustion prevents team members from moving up the Maslovian hierarchy of needs. A solution is to increase opportunities for self care.

- Permit opt-in work schedules. People who can work from home (often a safe, quiet space) or within a

flexible range of hours report less stress, higher job satisfaction and higher productivity.

- Explicitly offer sabbaticals, “mental health days”, and even the ability to take a break or pause a meeting can help reinforce the value of consensual participation.
- Don’t make impossible schedules that force overtime. This reduces developer agency and long term leads to bad decisions and team churn.

## Cozy trust and secrecy

Secrecy and trust are complicated issues in an office. It is crucial to have people you can confide in about doubts or concerns. However, the social dynamics of secrecy can result in decidedly anti-cozy patterns. An employee may not wish to report an issue to their boss for fear of the messenger being shot. Or they may prefer to communicate only through gossip. Or they might form cliques where others feel left out. These are all defensive behaviors intended to preserve personal safety. The response is to create safety such that there is less need for defensive behavior.

- Separate the role of manager and mentor (a senior developer not in the direct chain of management) to introduce a confidant who can be trusted and to remove strange power dynamics
- Actively police interactions where people are punished for being open and trusting. Encourage those that share unpleasant facts.
- Create opportunities for groups from different cliques to spend repeatedly time with one another. Trust is built upon relationships that form via repeat, positive interactions.

## Cozy feedback

One of the most fruitful avenues for encouraging more coziness in design practice is by cozifying feedback processes, because it makes people feel safe and increases trust. If you can do so earnestly, consider these guidelines for maximally cozy feedback:

- **Be gentle and considerate:** remember that most people want to be good and want to receive feedback, and are probably aware of the issue in some context, but it’s hard to switch contexts without raising defenses.
- **Be clear:** Ambiguity creates more pressure, and a generalized threat. Identifying specific behaviors, instead of identities, is similarly less threatening.
- **Respect wishes:** Respect requests on both sides for privacy, patience, and even outright secrecy, in the pursuit of improved trust.
- **Be timely:** Providing processes for *immediate* repair can restore a positive tone and return control to the person receiving feedback.

Giving feedback cozily would also, presumably, lead to longer-lasting behavioral changes, as the motivation is intrinsic. For more information, see the previous PH report [Creating Emotionally Safe Workplaces in Game Development](#).

## The challenge of conflict

If your working environment thrives on interpersonal conflict, anti-cozy patterns will predominate, and it may be very difficult to create a space, much less a culture, that can be reliably cozy. A conflict-driven culture may reach a successful local maxima, but there is a cost.

- Though fans of conflict may find this surprising, openness actually suffers as non-combative people put up protective walls.
- People who are unable to function in this kind of environment will either fail to perform (“He was quiet and didn’t volunteer many ideas”) or leave.
- Conflict stirs feelings of constant stress and anxiety so people never end up working on the Not

Urgent but Highly Important tasks of self improvement.

- Many forms of conflict enforce tribal norms resulting in uniformity of both people and ideas. This is particularly poisonous to the ideal of building a diverse workforce.

Changing a conflict-focus culture takes a dedicated and determined effort with vocal leadership support. If you have, or want to have, a diverse team that includes people with different backgrounds and different motivations, it may take some explicit signaling and welcoming in order to build the trust required for people to feel cozy and earnestly engage.

## The challenge of too much coziness

Lastly, it is possible to go overboard or cross boundaries in attempting to establish coziness.

- **Forcing Intimacy:** Intimacy requires both parties to feel comfortable, and pressure is inimical to it. Remember that social cues such as call-and-response can help gauge willingness to proceed, and ensure that opting-out of coziness is low-pressure too.
- **Lack of dissent:** There can be an escape into coziness where people are not willing to address difficult topics for fear of upsetting a pleasure situation. *Hedonic* coziness is a lesser state that lacks the psychological safety necessary for open and honest conversations. Be sure people can say what they need to say and if not, you need to do some work and have some clear conversations about how to work together better.
- **Not being honest about the stakes or impact of a power differential:** Consider the impossibility of hosting a truly cozy job interviews. One participant (the interviewee) cannot feel safe when the course of their life is at stake. Although elements of welcoming and pleasantness can help mitigate other discomforts, coziness shouldn't be used to manipulate and lull candidates into a false trust.

## Conclusions

We encourage developers to build cozy games. If you've made it this far, you've seen there is a deep well of emotionally resonant design patterns you can use to make almost any game cozier. And on a purely pragmatic level, broadening your game's appeal means more sales for the same effort. However, as we went through this process, we also started to see coziness can be treated a positive philosophy for driving meaningful change in the world.

## Coziness as a radical philosophy

In a time of increasing divisiveness, othering, and rampant fear and sensationalism, we propose that coziness - in that it provides safety, softness, and the satisfaction of needs - is in fact a powerful and necessary subversion of current culture.

In that coziness sees one's needs provided for, it is anti-capitalist, and supports the comfort and care of all people. In that coziness enables us to express our whole selves, without ramification, it is healing and validating in a hyper-critical world. In that coziness encourages the positive resolution of conflict, it is deeply mending to our societal divides. In that coziness elevates the softer, gentler aspects of life, it calms a threat-weary population and brings relief from fear. In that coziness creates spaces of plenty, it provides focus amongst chaos and allows us to embrace our highest level and most human pursuits. In that coziness offers us spaces of choice and support, it allows us to explore our underlying, intrinsic motivations.

Coziness is healing, validating, collaborative, and kind. Coziness is relief and refuge and gentle opportunity. In a harsh, demanding ecosystem of cynically generated needs and unending urgency, coziness creates comfort, and freedom, and a path to a better world.

# A cozy invitation

The following is an Invitation to radically cozy game-making, which you may send (edited at will) to colleagues:

*Dear designer whom I care for, I wish for you that game-making be a refuge from the storm. I take joy from the games you make, and I hope you feel fulfilled when you make them. As a colleague, I want you to feel safe to express your inner self, to take creative risks in your craft. As a friend, I wish that you can escape the ever-present hurry and pressure of our industry and world, into a restful, healthy practice. If you feel comfortable, I invite you to make a game that reflects those moments in your life that were meaningful, where you were content and cared for. I invite you to make a game that offers moments for players to reflect and be at ease. You don't have to show it to me; you don't have to share it with anyone. But I would like to be a companion in the journey towards cozier games, and I think others would, too, if you would have us. It's difficult and slow and I'm probably asking a lot from you. But if you try and fall short of your expectations, please know that I will still support and celebrate you. I care about you, and your work is but a small part of what makes you wonderful. Good luck, if and when you're ready, -- (your signature)*

Thank you so much for reading, Chelsea, Daniel, Jake, Dan, Tanya, Squirrel and Anthony

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