Nurturing Well-Being Through Play:

An Exploration of Cozy Games as Coping Mechanism to Manage

Mental Well-being

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June 2024

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Abstract

This research contributes to understanding the dynamic sector of gaming and its role in promoting mental well-being, specifically within the new and under-investigated genre of cozy games, known for providing a wholesome gaming experience. Recent studies indicate that mindful engagement with games can positively influence mental well-being, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic when gaming emerged as a coping mechanism to reduce anxiety and stress. This research delves deeper into this topic by examining gamers' experiences with cozy games as a coping mechanism to manage their mental well-being.

Through qualitative research, including eleven gamers aged 18-34, this study explored how individuals experience the functionality of cozy games as coping mechanisms in helping them transition to a positive psychological state, enabling them to function effectively in daily life. Results indicate that cozy games provide gratifications extending beyond mere hedonic pleasures, reaching utilitarian and social gratification, leading to a more profound and meaningful escapism. This escapism is not merely a distraction but a transformative experience through the pillars of cozy games that establish relaxation and foster growth, self-discovery, and more, enabling players to achieve a more positive psychological state through meaningful play. To prolong continuous engagement, players appreciate a balance of both lower-level and higher-level motivators, allowing them calmly to enjoy without dealing with in-game threats and instead indulge in growth and healing, thereby fostering a positive psychological state. Players experience cozy games as tool for both emotional and problem-focused coping, providing immediate stress relief as well as enhancing long-term mental resilience. While players view cozy games as a great coping tool for their mental well-being, they do not heavily rely on them as the sole solution. Instead, they experience cozy games as a reliable alternative that supports but does not replace professional medical help.

Overall, cozy games offer players a therapeutic experience, fostering mental and moral well-being through immersive and comforting environments. Cozy games are seen as vital component of coping repertoire, that foster a temporary relief as well as aid in cultivating a healthier and a more resilient psychological state, enhancing overall mental well-being. This study presents findings that both support and challenge the theories used, including Coping Mechanism, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Media System Dependency,

and more. While the research focused on quality over quantity, the sample size and reliance of self-reported data are noted limitations. This suggests a need for larger-scale studies and experimental validation to further fill the gap in academic research on cozy games.

Preface

      As someone who finds joy in gaming and deeply values mental well-being, I wanted to conclude my academic journey in a way that felt like a warm hug. This topic felt close to home, and the experience was made even warmer by the unwavering support of my family in Aruba, The Netherlands, Peru, my Chismosas, and my dear friend Zifeng. I am grateful to my thesis supervisor, whose guidance was like a gentle beacon of wisdom and kindness. Thank you to everyone who accompanied me along this path, making it a truly memorable and heart-warming experience!

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1. Introduction

The horizons of gaming are expanding beyond their conventional recreational role, as studies by Cutler et al (2015, pp. 107-108) as well as Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, p. 1) illustrate. Games have become so pervasive that research indicates games are now infiltrating the minds of gamers and shaping their perception of reality (de Gortari & Griffiths, 2015, p. 195). These revelations position gaming as a focal point, suggesting potential paradigm shift in the comprehension of the implication and application of gaming.

Acknowledging the infiltration of games into the mind of gamers, recent research suggests that when games are approached mindfully – with care and conscious awareness – gamers have the potential to experience positive influences on their mental well-being (Schijven & Kikkawa, 2024, p. 3). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the positive impacts of gaming on mental well-being, as many individuals turned to gaming as a coping mechanism – a psychological tool used to manage and deal with life stressors – resulting in a noticeable reduction in anxiety and stress (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022, p. 130). Notably, individuals frequently encountering life stressors include those in academia and young professionals (Edwards et al., 2021, p. 4; Khalid & Syed, 2024, p. 1). Consequently, healthcare professionals are advocating for the integration of gaming into healthcare practices (Schijven & Kikkawa, 2024, pp. 2-3). However, it is crucial to recognize the fragile balance needed, as studies indicate that without mindful engagement, gaming can lead to dependence on the virtual gaming world (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 354).

Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic, gaming, particularly 'cozy games' has been rapidly gaining popularity (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022, p. 128; Newzoo, 2023, p). This gaming genre is celebrated for its calming, warm, and soft characteristics, providing gamers with a wholesome gaming experience (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022, p. 131; Bodi, 2023b, para. 5). The concept 'wholesome' encompasses concepts of good health, physical well-being, and moral virtue, often associated with terms including ethical, innocent, pure, uplifting and clean (Stevenson, 2010, p. 1; Waite, 2012, p. 1). This description of 'wholesome' resonates with online discussions about cozy games. These games enable gamers to play comfortably without concerns about violence or competition, as expressed by Farough (2023, para. 1), or games that replace violence with comfort and community, as Krum (2023, para. 3) mentions. Cozy games foster a sense of safety by minimizing in-game threats and providing players with ample resource for substance and crafting, set in virtual environments filled with cuteness**,** softness, and kindness (Bodi, 2023b, para. 5; Cook et al., 2017, p. 1). Cozy games examples include *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020)

and *Stardew Valley (ConcernedApe, 2016)*. Acknowledging cozy games' robust sense of safety, researchers have begun to explore the potential of cozy games as a therapeutic tool (Chan et al., 2022, p. 127).

While cozy games are not a new genre to the gaming field, they are an emerging trend in academia with limited existing research, including Waszkiewicz and Bakun's (2020, p. 1) research *Towards The Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games*. Recognizing this gap, research companies and universities sought academic input on the various uncharted territories of cozy games (The University of Pennsylvania, 2023, para. 5). Given the scarcity of studies on cozy games and gaming's potential as mental well-being tool, this research strived to understand how cozy games contribute to gamers' managing their mental well-being. Thus, the research question was formulated as followed: *How do gamers perceive their experiences of using cozy games as a coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being?* Notably, while gaming appeals to a diverse audience, this study focused on gamers in academia and young professionals due to their higher exposure to life stressors (Edwards et al., 2021, p. 4; Khalid & Syed, 2024, p. 1.; Newzoo, 2023, p. 10).

1.1 Scientific & Societal Relevance

The creatives industries, encompassing various branches such as 'gaming', are recognized by the by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development as one of the world's most dynamic sectors (UNCTAD, n.d., para. 6). Institutions such as Erasmus University Rotterdam further highlight the relevance of the creative industries, considering them among the fastest-growing sectors (Erasmus University Rotterdam, n.d.). The gaming industry is noted by researchers such as Rykała (2020, p. 125), as one of the fastest-growing branches, with the potential to contribute to growth in various areas within countries (Rykała, 2020, p. 134). Based on the previously stated insights, it is evident that the gaming branch is perceived as relevant and promising. This underscores the relevance of conducting this research that explores various aspects of gaming, including the niche genre of cozy games, particularly in relation to mental well-being.

Furthermore, the goal of this research in exploring cozy games as a coping mechanism to manage mental well-being, holds both scientific and societal relevance. Scientifically, investigating how gamers perceive their experiences of using cozy games, can provide valuable insights into understanding the influences of cozy games genre on aiding individuals in managing their mental well-being. Additionally, exploring cozy games to

managing mental well-being enriches academic discussion on the therapeutic potential of gaming noted by Chan et al. (2022, p. 127) as well as Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, pp. 2-3). Chan et al. (2022, p. 127) suggest that through the abundance of safety embedded in cozy games, patients can acquire a sense of psychological safety where they can experience reductions in stress and increased mindfulness. Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, pp. 2-3) suggest that gaming can have positive impacts on the physicality and psychology of individuals, advising healthcare practitioners to consider implementing gaming within their healthcare practices. Nonetheless, by researching cozy games in relation to mental well-being, it addresses and actively fills the research gap in academic research on cozy games (The University of Pennsylvania, 2023, para. 5).

Lastly, regarding societal relevance, delving into the expanding role of gaming in mental health is crucial as expressed by Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, pp. 2-3). Understanding gamers' experiences of using cozy games as coping mechanism can help dismantle the stigma of gaming on mental health, as noted by Galanis et al. (2021, p. 1), where gaming is stigmatized to be addicting and can lead to mental challenges. Therefore, researching cozy games in relation to mental well-being can provide valuable insights that will be beneficial to game developers in promoting games from a positive perspective in relation to mental well-being. Additionally, it can raise awareness among individuals and health-care practitioners about the potential of gaming, particularly cozy games, as contributors to promoting societal mental well-being (Schijven & Kikkawa, 2024, p. 3).

1.2 Chapter Outline

This study embarks by delving into a theoretical framework that integrates insights from academic literature and discussions surrounding various concepts, including cozy games, mental well-being, coping mechanism, uses and gratification, and media dependency. The subsequent section delineates the methodological approach undertaken, providing comprehensive details on the qualitative research design, data collection methods, thematic data analysis approach, ethical considerations, research quality, and operationalization. Following this, the results chapter encapsulate three key themes derived from theoretical framework and from interviews conducted with cozy gamers who are either in academia or are young professional. Lastly, the research concludes by synthesizing the findings, addressing the research question, and emphasizing the limitations of the study alongside recommendation for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

To understand how gamers are experiencing the use of cozy games as coping mechanism to manage their mental well-being, this chapter delves into an in-depth exploration of theories, concepts, phenomena, and discussions from prior research. This exploration is essential for the theoretical understanding of this research topic and provides a pathway for data interpretation and argument development. Through meticulous curation and organization of relevant aspects from previous research, a robust theoretical framework was constructed.

The theoretical framework is divided into three sections, each playing an imperative role in elucidating gamers usage experience of cozy games as coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being. The first section, 'unpacking cozy games' is imperative as this research is exclusively centered around cozy games, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of their nature and significance. The second section, 'mind matters: coping & mental well-being' is essential as this research focuses on exploring the relationship between cozy games and mental well-being, therefore understanding how gaming navigates in the realm of mental well-being is crucial to better grasp the specific role of cozy games in this context. The last section, 'uses, gratifications, & dependency' is essential as it highlights the gratification behind cozy games usage and gamers' potential dependency on them as coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being.

2.1 Unpacking Cozy Games

2.1.1 Defining Cozy Games

Delving into a multitude of academic papers, dictionaries, blogs, and presentations, it became evident that terms such as 'casual', 'pure', or 'ambient' only scratch the surface of the true essence of cozy games. While these term touch on various aspects of the cozy gaming experience, they fail to fully capture the magic inherent in cozy games.

Cozy games represent a genre celebrated for their calming, warm, and soft characteristics, offering players a wholesome gaming experience exemplified by titles like *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022, p. 131; Nintendo, 2020). The term 'wholesome' encapsulates concepts of moral virtue, physical well-being, innocence, and upliftment (Stevenson, 2010; Waite, 2012). The term is also associated with nurturing and nourishing of an individual's mental and moral well-being (Merriam-Webster, 2024, para. 1). Considering Merriam-Webster (2024, para. 1), Stevenson's (2010), and Waite's

(2012) definitions, it is evident that the wholesome experience encompasses uplifting, enthusiastic, and morally virtuous elements, facilitating gamers to nurture their mental and moral well-being.

Furthermore, gaming industry professionals delved into the realm of cozy games, noting their ability to foster a sense of safety by minimizing in-game threats and providing players with ample in-game resources for substance and crafting, all set in environments filled with cuteness, softness, and kindness (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1). Similarly, Maya Bloem (Bloem), a narrative designer and game writer for the cozy game *Mail Time*, perceives cozy games as havens from perfectionism, threats, and competition (Kela van der Deijl, 2023). Rather, Bloem views cozy games as creating playful, virtual soothing environments resembling safe where players can virtually learn, grow, and find healing through play (M. Bloem, personal communication, February 29, 2024). Likewise, Bodi (2023b, pp. 1-2) perceives cozy games as soothing, comforting, structured, and secure.

Additionally, online discourses from gaming blogs reflect similar perspectives to Bodi (2023b, pp. 1-2), Cook et al. (2017, p. 1), and Bloem. One gaming blog perceives cozy games as games where gamers can play comfortably without concerns about violence or competition (Farough, 2023, para. 1). Whereas another gaming blog expresses that cozy games are games that replace in-game violence and tragedy with comfort and community (Krum, 2023, para. 3).

Based on all the aforementioned insights this research defined cozy games as the following – Cozy games are a sanctuary-like gaming experience, shielding gamers from in-game pressures and threats, while virtually immersing them in tranquility and nurturing them in safety in a soothing, charming, and playful environment abundant with virtual resources and agency for creativity and crafting, resulting in a wholesome experience that fosters mental and moral well-being while indulging in play.

2.1.2 Cozy Games Constitutions: Pillars & Narratives

Cozy games immerse gamers in a serene sanctuary, fostering sense of tranquility and safety within a virtual comforting environment. Achieving this ambience, cozy games are constructed upon foundational pillars and narratives structures meticulously designed to evoke the cozy game feel.

Cozy games are defined by three pillars: safety, abundance, and softness (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1).

Firstly, safety, is established through the absence of in-game threats, dangers, risks, and penalties. Instead, cozy games revolve around voluntariness, include easily repeatable tasks, and exploration without time constraints, which facilitate fostering a sense of familiarity and comfort (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1; Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 226). Similarly, Bloem emphasized the importance of in-game safety within cozy games, introducing a unique aspect: the absence of in-game pressure to perform perfect. Through this lack of pressure, gamers feel secure to virtually experiment and learn from failure, making cozy games accessible and contributing to the relaxed experience (M. Bloem, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

Secondly, abundance, is established through the ample availability of in-game basic needs, such as shelter, time, food, and crafting materials (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs a theory on human needs across hierarchical levels, the fulfilment of these basic in-game needs enables players to shift their focus towards in-game higher-level aspirations, including self-actualization (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1). Bloem views abundance as form of in-game capitalism within cozy games, where the continuous accumulation of in-game resources mitigates concerns. This cultivates virtual atmosphere free from worries, where players can experiment with lower fear of failure (M. Bloem, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

The third pillar, softness, is established through the usage of art styles and designs that prioritize smoothness and gentleness, thereby creating a virtual environment of comforting stimuli within cozy games. This lowers individuals' state of arousal and stress while stabilizing engagement (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1). Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020, pp. 226-227) suggest that cozy games incorporate softness through warm, ambient, and natural sounds, as well as gentle low contrast color in the virtual environment, serving to eliminate potential sources of anxiety. Alternatively, Bodi (2023b, pp. 1-2) views cozy games softness through the analytical lens of cuteness, highlighting the incorporation of cute beings, lush nature, and soothing sounds.

Additionally, it is essential to understand that the pillars by Cook et al. (2017, p. 1) specifically refer to the virtual world of cozy games and not real-life scenarios. Safety refers to the sense of security gamers feel within the game. Abundance pertains to the in-game resources provided such as shelter and food. Softness involves the aesthetic elements within the game, including art styles, designs, or sounds that create comforting virtual atmospheres. This research uses these pillars to explore how the virtual experiences with cozy games are translated into gamers' real-life mental well-being coping mechanism.

Furthermore, cozy games can be dissected, with their components integrated into games to evoke a sense of cozyness. Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020, p. 233) explored how the cozy game experience, whether dominant or as game component, is incorporated into the narrative function or impact of games. Three narratives impact application types were found – coherent, dissonant, and situational.

Coherent narratives in cozy games use cozy aesthetics to convey a message, often emphasizing simplicity and relaxation through easy tasks (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 233). *Stardew Valley*, is an example of a cozy game with coherent narrative, where players engage in farming with the goal to relax and foster the message of journey (ConcernedApe, 2016; Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 233).

Dissonant narratives incorporation in cozy games may appear paradoxical, as it merges two opposing elements. This juxtaposition is achieved by integrating cozy aesthetic elements, such as warm colors, and lush visuals, to create a comfortable environment to address challenging topics like grief (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020. pp. 233-234). Similarly, Bloem expressed that cozy games offer a safe and honest space for confronting tough topics, which enables players to heal and learn (M. Bloem, personal communication, February 29, 2024). *Spiritfarer,* is an exemplary cozy game with dissonant narrative, where players find themselves immersed in a cozy environment, learning to confront death by guiding spirit friend into the afterlife (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020).

Lastly, situational narratives in cozy games employ cozy aesthetics to establish safe locations within games that may not align entirely with the cozy game appeal (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020. p. 235). Instead, specific areas such as checkpoints, are featured that embody the three pillars of cozy games. *Don't starve,* is example of a cozy games with situational narrative that neglects the pillars, but still incorporates them into the checkpoint locations (Klei Entertainment, 2013).

All in all, pillars and narratives are essential component to this research, offering insights that go beyond game titles and genres to define cozy games. Pillars reveal the virtual elements that shape the cozy experience, serving as a lens for examining cozy gamers' experiences. Whereas narratives help identify cozy game type, including those not immediately recognizable as such, thereby enriching the understanding of the cozy game genre.

2.1.3 Cozy Games Motivations & Meaningful play

Cook et al. (2017, p. 2) asserts that the motivation for people to engage with cozy games is the 'meaningful play' they derive from them. Two models were identified that establishes meaningful play: self-practice of seldom-used skills in a secure environment, and fulfilment of unmet needs.

Regarding self-practice of seldom-used skills in the secure environments of cozy games, gamers find themselves in settings where they can experiment and practice skills and scenarios that are impractical and impossible in the real world (Cook et al., 2017, p. 2). Whereas through the fulfilment of unmet needs in cozy games, gamers feel that needs such as shelter, food are already fulfilled, which enables gamers to focus on other needs like self-actualization or relationship building with characters within cozy games (Maslow, 1943, pp. 5-6). Nonetheless, Cook et al. (2017, p. 2) suggest that while meaningful play can foster a certain motivation, this motivation can fluctuate. Game mechanics primarily centered on needs related to survival, responsibilities, or betrayal can diminish the cozy game experience, stripping away cozy games' motivational charm.

Based on the secure environment provided by cozy games for practicing seldom-used skills and their emphasis on addressing unmet needs, players are motivated by the limitless opportunities to foster overlooked emotional and physical abilities to achieve personal growth. These elements collectively contribute to the motivation for 'meaningful play' in cozy games.

2.2 Mind Matters: Mental Well-being & Coping

2.2.1 Beyond Play: Gaming's Expanding Influence

This subchapter illustrates the departure of games from their traditional recreational boundaries into the realm of well-being, thereby setting the stage for the rest of the second chapter that delves deeper into how gaming is linked to mental well-being and coping mechanism. Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, p. 1) highlight the transformative journey of gaming, noting its progression from a leisure activity to a potentially therapeutic medium capable of fostering health benefits among gamers. This shift extends across various areas of human well-being, with mental well-being being particularly essential (Schijven & Kikkawa, 2024, 1-2). De Gortari and Griffiths (2015, p. 195) provide a compelling reasoning for this expansion, suggesting that the pervasive influence of games is infiltrating and shaping the minds of gamers.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the transition of gaming beyond its recreational norm. Families and individuals turned to gaming as means of coping with the lifestyle transition, utilizing games as a tool for escaping reality, mood regulation, relaxation, and more (Pearce et al., 2022, pp. 773-774). Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022, p. 130) elaborate that during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a significant increase in individuals using gaming as a coping mechanism to enhance their mental well-being.

Moreover, the Video Games Europe *Global Power of Play* report (2023, pp. 7-9) encapsulate the findings of Pearce et al. (2022, pp. 773-774) as well as Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022, p. 130), indicating that gamers worldwide perceive gaming as a way to alleviate stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation, thereby enhancing their happiness and mental well-being. However, Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, p. 3) explain that to fully harness the potential mental well-being benefits of gaming, gamers must approach gaming with a conscious and mindful perspective.

2.2.2 Mental Well-Being & Gaming's Intersection

Mental well-being is fundamental to overall human welfare, signifying an individual's capacity to cope with daily life stressors and function effectively in diverse aspects of life (Khalid & Syed, 2024, p. 2). The term 'well-being' centers on the domain of psychological experiences, emotions, and satisfaction, distinct from the broader scope of mental health, which includes both the physical and psychological aspects (Khalid & Syed, 2024, p. 2).

Di Cesare et al. (2023, p. 2) categorizes mental well-being into positive and negative psychological states. The positive psychological state integrates factors including autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships, environmental control, self-acceptance, and a sense of purpose, while the negative psychological state represents the opposite. Wang et al. (2023, p. 1) simplified this segmentation, perceiving positive state as the absence of depressive symptoms and the presence of a serene and joyful perspective, whereas the negative state encompasses depressive symptoms and the absence of a serene and joyful perspective. Similarly, positive well-being is defined as mental embodying feelings of confidence, happiness, contentment, alongside the capacity to effectively function (Kent, 2016, para. 1). Researchers have developed a scale to characterize positive psychological states with calm, enthusiasm, cheerfulness, and peace, while negative states include irritability, tenseness, boredom, stress, depression, and sadness (Knight et al., 2022, para. 14).

Based on the aforementioned perspectives this research defined positive psychological state as a mental state characterized by the absence of depressive symptoms and the presence of serene and joyful perspectives that foster confidence, happiness, autonomy, personal growth, sociability, environmental control, and self-acceptance, while enabling effective function and sense of purpose. Conversely, negative psychological state is defined as a mental state characterized by the presence of depressive symptoms and the absence of serene and joyful perspectives that foster irritability, tension, boredom, stress, depression, nervousness, and sadness, while hindering effective functioning.

Moreover, Rajgopal (2010, para. 1) suggests that mental well-being issues are prominent in the workplace, potentially leading to burnout affecting performance in both professional and personal spheres. Building upon this notion, Khalid and Syed (2024, pp. 1-3) reveal that among young professional and individuals engaged in paid employment, one in five experience poor mental well-being, attributed to job demands that challenge the employees' ability to cope. Beyond the professional realm, there is a noticeable increase in mental challenges among those in academia – including students, graduates, professors, faculty members, and PhD candidates (Edwards et al., 2021, p. 3). A significant portion of academia individuals whether local or international report experiencing symptoms associated with burnout, anxiety, and depression (Edwards et al., 2021, pp. 4-5). Watson (2023, pp. 1-2) elaborates that the demanding workload, lack of support, and potential financial struggles, are contributing factors to the declining mental well-being of individuals in academia. Upon closer examination, age groups most affected by poor mental well-being are 18-24, followed by 25-34, while stress and anxiety levels decrease among older age groups (Vankar, 2023, para. 1).

In the realm of gaming, Di Cesare et al., (2023, pp. 2-3) advocates gaming's impact on mental well-being, extending to various aspects of gamers' lives including educational and professional domains. Gaming offers both cognitive and affective benefits, promoting gamers mental well-being. Immersive gaming has the power to promote emotional regulation, optimism, attention span, memory, and spatial awareness, all contributing to enhancing mental well-being (Di Cesare et al., 2023, pp. 2-3). Additional studies also support the perception of gaming having positive effect on mental well-being, with gamers reporting feeling grounded, balanced emotions, stress relief, and escapism (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022, pp. 130-132).

Examining cozy games in relation to mental well-being reveals the essential role of cozy games' pillars in fostering a healing environment. Safety reduces stress levels, while

softness creates a comforting ambiance, and abundance ensures in-game lower-level needs are met, enabling focus on in-game higher-level needs such as self-actualization, which links to promoting mental well-being (Bodi, 2023b, pp. 1-2; Cook et al., 2017, p. 1; Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 226). Bloem further emphasizes the significance of this environment, noting how the absence of pressure combined with an atmosphere of optimism, provides a haven for gamers to heal (M. Bloem, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

However, Di Cesare et al. (2023, pp. 2-3) caution against gaming-related issues, including severe game dependency, highlighting the importance of mindful engagement. They note that not all gaming genres have the same effect, aligning with Schijven and Kikkawa's (2024, p. 3) perspective on mindful gaming. This notion is supported by Porter & Goolkasian (2019, p. 11), who claim that different game types have different influences on mental well-being, where fighting games may evoke symptoms of aggression and stress, relaxing games do not. Porter & Goolkasian (2019, p. 11) also suggest that games encompass various aspects including narratives and music, which collectively influence individuals' mental states.

2.2.3 Coping through Cozy Games

Mental well-being refers to the state of mind individuals strive to improve or stabilize to function effectively and contribute to the community (Khalid & Syed, 2024, p. 2). To achieve this state of mind, various forms coping mechanisms are used including, journaling, talking, exercising, as well as gaming (Pearce et al., 2022, p. 775).

Coping mechanisms serve as psychological tools individuals use to manage and deal with life stressors (Einav & Margalit, 2023, p. 1). They are also perceived as actions individuals undertake to address behaviors and emotions, with the goal of mitigating the impact of stress on both physical and psychological well-being (Iryanidar & Irwan, 2023, p. 1). These psychological tools play a crucial role in promoting mental well-being, by enabling individuals to manage negative thoughts, reducing anxiety and stress, enhancing sense of stability during uncertainty, promoting positive thinking and behavior, or persuading socialization (Einav & Margalit, 2023, p. 1).

Moreover, coping mechanism can be classified into two main types – problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping aims to eliminate the core of the problem or stressors directly (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 342; Pearce et al., 2022, p. 774). This approach is widely regarded as effective and beneficial as it directly addresses the root cause of the issue (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 342). Behaviors associated with problem-

focused coping include staying occupied, establishing routines, and socialization (Pearce et al., 2022, pp. 782-785). Whereas emotion-focused coping focuses on managing the psychological or emotional response to stressor or problem (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 342; Pearce et al., 2022, p. 774). While it may not directly tackle the underlying problem, emotion-focused coping fosters psychological resilience, which can empower individuals to address the source of stress more effectively (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 342). Behaviors associated with emotion-focused coping include escapism, distraction, mood management, emotional regulation that encapsulates calmness and relaxation (Pearce et al., 2022, p. 785). Studies suggest that gaming is often used as a form of emotion-focused coping rather than problem-focused coping (Pearce et al., 2022, p. 778). However, it is acknowledged that both types of coping are crucial to promoting and maintaining overall well-being (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 342).

In the realm of gaming, gaming has been widely recognized as a coping mechanism for many, providing solace during times of stress (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022, p. 129). While various media forms offer coping mechanisms, gaming's interactive nature sets it apart. This interactivity grants gamers a sense of control, competence, and autonomy as they navigate virtual environments (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 344). Pearce et al. (2022, p. 776) elaborates that gamers' ability to shape game content and actions fosters continuous interaction between game data and user, influencing the gaming experience, enjoyment, mood regulation, and arousal.

Moreover, studies suggest that through gaming's visual aesthetics, music, storyline, and sound design, video games provide enjoyment and fun, aiding gamers in coping (Di Cesare et al., 2023, p. 6). Cozy games like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* are particularly effective in promoting coping (Nintendo, 2020; Pearce et al., 2022, p. 777). Characterized by their relaxing nature that creates environments of calmness and positivity allows players to escape reality, while the availability of in-game resources and minimal pressure to achieve goals fosters the sense of control within cozy games ultimately contributing to mood management (Pearce et al., 2022, p. 777). Similarly, Bodi (2023b, p. 1-2) suggest that the agency granted to gamers in cozy games provide a sense of control, facilitating an escape from real-life anxieties.

However, it is essential to approach escapism with caution, as excessive reliance on it may lead to negative outcomes. While escapism offers temporary relief and aids in recovery, prolonged engagement may result in gamers becoming overly attached to the virtual world, straying from their initial goals and experience worsened self-perception (Lee & Chen, 2023,

p. 354). This notion connects to the concerns raised by Di Cesare et al. (2023, pp. 2-3) caution against gaming-related issues, including severe game dependency, as well as Schijven and Kikkawa's (2024, p. 3) mindful approach to gaming.

2.3 Uses, Gratification, & Dependency

2.3.1 Uses, Gratifications, & Cozy Fulfilments

Engaging in activities like gaming is driven by the need for fulfilment. The 'Uses and Gratification Theory' stands out as one of the most effective theories for identifying individuals' needs aimed to be fulfilled and motives behind using diverse media forms (Menon, 2022b, p. 2). This theory serves to conceptualize psychological needs that influence why individuals choose for specific media, based on their psychological inclinations (Shin et al., 2021, p. 621). Notably, the Uses and Gratification Theory adopts a user-centered perspective and assumes that individuals' gratification motives can foresee how individuals use media and the resulting impact (Menon, 2022a, p. 3). Given this study aims to comprehend how gamers use cozy games as coping mechanism to manage their mental well-being, the Uses and Gratification Theory is an essential theory that enables this research to understand the various motivations and uses of cozy games.

Furthermore, examining the different components of Uses and Gratification Theory, the term 'uses' tackles the media or product selected for usage. It is suggested that this selection process is driven by either habitual or purposeful motives (Lin, 1999, p. 204). Menon (2022a, p. 3) conceptualized 'gratification' as the satisfaction individuals' experience when their needs are met through media usage aligning with their expectations. This notion aligns with Shin et al.'s (2021, p. 622) claim that the Uses and Gratification Theory can be segmented further into two categories: gratification sought, and gratification obtained. Gratification Sought tackles the anticipated gratification individuals seek before usage, aligning with Menon's (2022a, p. 3) 'expectation aspect'. Whereas gratification obtained tackles the gratification individuals acquire after usage, aligning with the Menon's (2022a, p. 3) 'the fulfilment of individuals needs'(Shin et al., 2021, p. 622).

The Uses and Gratification Theory has been applied across diverse media forms including mobile gaming and TV, revealing different gratification categories: technological gratifications (e.g., documentation), hedonic gratifications (e.g., passing time, entertainment, escape, enjoyment), utilitarian gratification (e.g., self-presentation, task management, learning, professionalization), and social gratification (e.g., socialization, interacting) (Menon, 2022b, p. 2). Earlier research has also identified related categories linked to media

gratification – social interaction, pass time, entertainment, convenience utility, and communication utility communication unitality."(Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Furthermore, uses and gratification in relation to games, gamers seek to fulfil their psychological needs within these virtual worlds, recognizing that not all games cater to or satisfy the same arrays of needs (Cook et al., 2017. p. 2). Particularly, cozy games focus on gratifying higher-order needs, as they present players with an environment where in-game lower-level needs are already satisfied through the pillars of abundance and safety (Cook et al., 2017. pp. 1-2). This concept aligns closely with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological theory delineating human needs across hierarchical levels, offering insight into the fulfilment provided by cozy games (Cook et al., 2017, p. 2; Mcleod, 2018, p. 1). Maslow claims that individuals prioritize certain needs over others, with basic needs including physiological needs (e.g., food, water) and safety needs (e.g., security, shelter) at the lower-level. Once these foundational needs are gratified, only then individuals can focus on higher-level needs including psychological needs including belongingness and love (e.g., friendship), and esteem (e.g., feeling of accomplishment), as well as self-fulfillment needs including self-actualization (e.g. creative activities, realizing one's full potential) (see figure 1) (Mcleod, 2018, p. 1).

Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020, p. 226) further elaborate on how cozy games inherently cater to these in-game lower-level needs, that allow players to focus on higher-level needs. Upon entering the realm of cozy game, gamers are relieved from the pressure of high stress and survival. Instead, they find themselves in a space where they can concentrate on the subtle yet crucial task of personal growth by addressing their higher-level needs, thereby tapping into escapism fulfilment (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 226). Similarly, Bloem explains that by creating an environment that addresses gamers' everyday basic needs, complemented by the comforting atmosphere, enables gamers to indulge in escapism (M. Bloem, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

Figure 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Intersection with cozy games
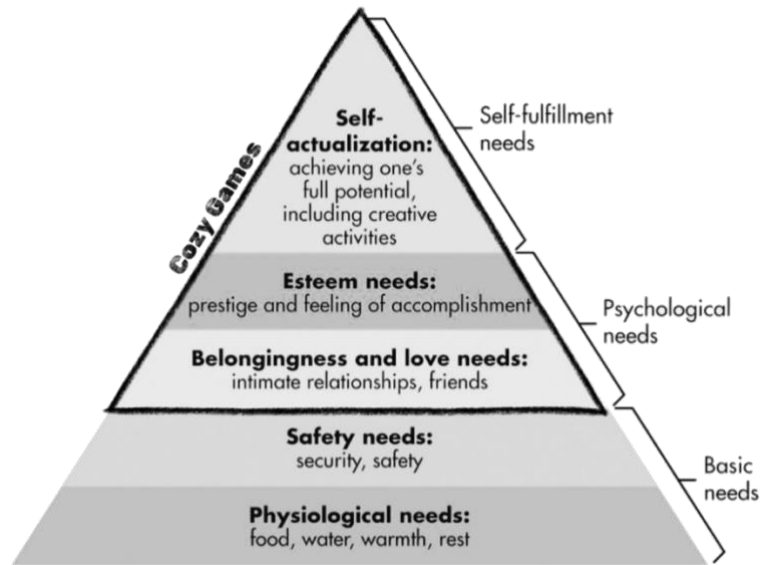
Note. Adapted from Saul Mcloed's (2018) take on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid, *Simply Psychology.* The intersection with cozy games was added by the author.

2.3.2 Escaping into Cozy Games: Media Dependencies Explored

The Uses & Gratification Theory establishes the framework for understanding and identifying gaming dependency by delving into the motivation of gamers in engaging with and remaining engrossed in cozy games. Building upon this, the Media System Dependency Theory assumes that when a media adequately fulfils individuals' needs and expectation, it can stimulate the development of a dependent relationship between the individual and the media (Carillo et al., 2017, p. 320). The theory focuses on the relationship between the media and the individual, while the term 'dependency' narrows the examination to how individuals rely on the resources of another party to achieve something (Zhang & Zhong, 2020, p. 3). When this reliance exists, a dependent relationship is at play; however, when it does not, there is not a dependent relationship at play. The development of a dependent relationship with media are inclined to develop when individuals find the resources of the media helpful in achieving their goal (Zhang & Zhong, 2020, p. 3). Nonetheless, Carillo et al. (2017, p. 320) further elaborate that dependent relationship tend to be goal-driven, and the strength of the goal can affect the strength of the dependent relationship between the media and individuals.

Furthermore, the Media System Dependency Theory identifies two levels of dependency that indicate the extent to which individuals will use a media: 'psychological

dependency' and 'goal-oriented dependency'. Both levels of dependency are distinct and have different effects on individuals. Psychological dependency, often referred to as addiction, is the negative mental reliance on technology to such a degree that individuals start to exhibit symptoms of behavioral addiction (Carillo et al., 2017, pp. 320-321). These symptoms include conflicts with task completion, mental preoccupation, relapse, negative mood changes, and high tolerance (Carillo et al., 2017, pp. 320-321). On the other hand, Goal-oriented dependency involves the recognition of technology as a resource to achieve specific goals. This level of dependency emphasizes the positive outcomes of media usage (Carillo et al., 2017, pp. 320-321).

Moreover, when examining the interplay between Media System Dependency Theory and cozy games, it becomes evident that cozy games have the tendency to foster the sense of escapism and fulfil the need for it. For instance, Pearce et al. (2022, p. 777) names *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as the 'island of escape' (Nintendo, 2020). While escapism offers gamers relief from real-world issues and allows them to recuperate by immersing themselves in the wholesome environment of cozy games, yet prolonged engagement may result in gamers becoming overly attached to the virtual world (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 354). This notion aligns with concerns raised by Di Cesare et al. (2023, pp. 2-3) regarding against gaming-related issues, including addiction. Therefore, the Media System Dependency Theory enables this research to gain a deeper understanding of the level of dependency gamers might have with cozy games when managing their mental well-being.

3. Methodology

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the methodology approach used to explore how gamers perceive their experience of using cozy games as a coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being. Included in this chapter are details on the research design approach, data collection methods, sampling and recruitment strategies, ethical considerations, data analysis techniques, steps taken to maintain research quality, and operationalization.

3.1 Research Design

This study aimed to understand gamers experience in using cozy games as a coping mechanism for their mental well-being. Acknowledging the existence of diversity in perspectives, opinions, and experiences among gamers underscored the necessity of applying a research design that accommodates such variations.

Therefore, this research adopted a qualitative research design, as it is recognized for its in-depth focus on the social construction of subjects, by prioritizing the quality of data over the quantity (Brennen, 2017, pp. 14-15). Beyond its emphasis on data quality, qualitative research does not aim to identify influences or effect, rather it focusses on exploring the relationship between media and society (Brennen, 2017, p. 5). Cozy games being the media and gamers being the societal element, a qualitative research design enabled the exploration of their interplay. This approach helped to gain an in-depth understanding and gather a richer insight into gamers' experiences with cozy games as a tool for enhancing their mental well-being.

3.2 Data Collection

This research applied semi-structured interviews as the data collection research method to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and experiences of gamers using cozy games to manage their mental well-being. By applying interviews, individuals were able to freely express themselves on this research topic. Researchers view interviews to be a valuable tool capable of gathering a significant amount of relevant data that enriches understanding (Babbie, 2017, p. 29; Brennen, 2017, p. 319). Interviews as data collection method proved ideal, as it centers on enabling interviewees to organically share their meanings, opinions, interest, and experiences on specific subjects, offering insights into attributed meanings (Kvale, 2011, pp. 9-11). Given that interviews capture the personal

background of interviewees and this research focusses on the deeply personal topic of mental well-being, interviews were the ideal data collection method (Brennen, 2017, p. 32).

Furthermore, the interview style this research executed was semi-structured. This style was chosen as it allowed the researcher to tackle topics and questions, while allowing the interviewee to deviate when important concepts arise, facilitating deeper exploration (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). Also, this approach aligned with this research due to its flexible nature, fostering a natural interviewing style and more personal atmosphere crucial for discussing topics related to mental well-being. The semi-structured interviews included ice-breaking questions, main questions tied to the theoretical framework, follow-up questions, and probing questions. To ensure structure and focus on the research goal, an interview guide was developed, encompassing all questions, thus aiding the research process during interviews (see Appendix A) (Ruslin et al., 2022. p. 4).

Lastly, this research conducted a total of 11 semi-structured interviews, aiming initially for 15. However, after several semi-structured interviews, responses began to overlap, and new information became scarce, indicating that saturation had been reached (Brennen, 2017, p. 32). All semi-structured interviews occurred in April 2023, each lasting 45-60 minutes through Zoom. Zoom was selected as the platform for all interviews because of its recording and transcription capabilities facilitated a meticulous analysis of the responses, ensuring that no details were overlooked.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

This research applied the purposive sampling method to closely examine and understand the relationship between gamers and cozy games in managing mental well-being. By selecting participants with characteristics directly relevant to the research focus, purposive sampling enhances the likelihood of collecting vital information, thus deepening our understanding of the subject (Babbie, 2017, p. 196). This non-probability sampling method proves particularly advantageous for the research's aim to obtain in-depth insights rather than a vast quantity of data, ensuring that the selected individuals are likely to offer valuable contributions to the research (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 653- 654).

Interviewees were recruited based on specific criteria to ensure compliance with purposive sampling and research relevance. Firstly, participants were required to be either active or frequent players of cozy games that fall under the definition this research gave to cozy games. This ensured familiarity with the genre to enable more meaningful interviews.

Secondly, participants were required to be within the age range of 18 to 34 years. This age bracket was selected based on Vankar (2023, para. 1) findings, which identified the age groups 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 as most affected by poor mental well-being. Therefore, this research combined these age groups for broader inclusivity. Lastly, participants needed to be involved in academia or young professionals, as these groups are found to encounter significant life stressors (Edwards et al., 2021, p. 3; Khalid & Syed, 2024, pp. 1-3). This research was inclusive of participants from any location, nationality, and gender, provided they could communicate in a common language. However, the focus was not on exploring the differences across these variables in relation to the research topic, but rather understanding their experience with cozy games.

Moreover, the recruitment process took place on Discord, a popular platform that is embraced by gamers for enabling easy communication and community group creation (Vladoiu & Constantinescu, 2020, p. 1). The researcher became active in 'Cozy Gamers' and 'The Cozy Café' Discord groups, which are known for their large communities of cozy game enthusiasts. An announcement was posted in these Discord groups, gamers who met the criteria responded and were scheduled for an interview. A total of 11 participants that complied with the sampling criteria were recruited (see Appendix B).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the personal nature of mental well-being and coping strategies in relation to gaming, this study implemented various measures to ensure participants were treated with honesty and protected from emotional harm (Brennen, 2017, p. 16).

All participants received a consent form to clarify the research objectives and their individual role within it. This form outlines the research scope, how their information would be used, participation rights, potential risks, confidentiality measures, the voluntary nature of their involvement, privacy measures, and contact details for further inquiries (Babbie, 2017, p. 65) (see Appendix C). By signing the consent form, participants agreed to take part in the interviews voluntarily and consented to being voice recorded. Nonetheless, before each interview, the interviewer reiterated the voluntary nature, assured the recording would be used only for academic purposes, and emphasized their rights to decline answering any questions. Additionally, participants were informed that they could contact the researcher after the interview to withdraw their consent for the use of their data.

Additionally, this research prioritized participants well-being throughout data collection. To enhance comfort, the interviewer established rapport at the beginning of each interview session with ice-breaking questions. Efforts were made to avoid excessive probing and remain vigilant for any signs of discomfort, indicated by participant's body language (Brennen, 2017, p. 16).

3.5 Data Analysis

This research involved gathering a substantial amount of interview data. Therefore, this research applied 'thematic analysis', a method known to excel in organizing, analyzing, identifying, and reporting patterns within large data which clustered into overarching themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). The creation of themes signifies the discovery of meaningful patterns in the collected data relevant to the research question (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). Also, thematic analysis is ideal given its deductive and inductive nature in theme creation (Joffe, 2011, p. 210). From the theoretical framework initial themes were deduced, while the inductive nature allowed the emergence of themes through the analysis of the interviews conducted (Joffe, 2011, p. 210).

Furthermore, Brennen (2021, p. 140) highlights the importance for researchers becoming familiar with the collected data. Therefore, after interviews were conducted the researcher became familiar with the data by transcribing carefully. Additionally, the interview recordings and the transcribed interviews were stored in a folder (Babbie, 2017, p. 215). Once all interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded to 'Atlas.ti', a data analysis software specialized in textual analysis. The steps taken to conduct thematic analysis were as follows (Cormack et al., 2018, pp. 3-4): 1) data familiarity – the researcher became more familiar with the transcribed interviews by re-reading the interviews once again. 2) Initial code generation – the researcher reviewed all interviews and coded any perceived meaning. 3) Category generation – the researcher analyzed all initial codes and clustered them into categories by comparing and examining their meanings. 4) Sub-theme generation – the research clustered categories that shared similar elements and patterns together into overarching sub-themes. 5) Theme generation – the researcher clustered the sub-themes under overarching themes. 6) Final review – the researcher revisited the entire process to ensure no aspects were overlooked and everything was coherent.

Through these steps a coding tree was developed to present an overview of all initial codes, categories, sub-themes, and themes (see Appendix D). These themes guided the explanation and answer to the research question.

3.6 Research Quality

This research aimed to ensure quality through specific practices, focusing on validity and reflexivity. Validity pertains to the accuracy of information in reflecting the intended measurement's goal (Babbie, 2017, p. 152). This research addressed various levels of validity to strengthen its overall validity. Face validity – whether a test measures its intended target – was established through the creation of clear interview questions directly addressing the research question, interview guide revision, and a pilot interview (Babbie, 2017, p. 153). Content validity – the extent to which a test covers the research topic – was ensured by the theoretical framework that spanned across various domains of the research questions. Additionally, the inclusion of industry experts like game narrative developer Bloem, enriched the research's relevance to the gaming industry (Babbie, 2017, p. 154). Construct validity – the degree to which a test measures what it is supposed to – was ensured through clear operationalization. Concepts were carefully defined based on the theoretical framework, and interview questions were derived from each operationalized concept (Babbie, 2017, p. 153).

Lastly, in qualitative research acknowledging the influence of the researcher's own beliefs, perspectives, and values on data collection and analysis is fundamental. Tracy (2010, p. 842) advocates for the practice of self-reflexivity and transparency. Researchers need to be sincere about all decisions, shortcoming, and strengths during data collection and analysis. Brennen (2017, p. 17) emphasized the importance of researchers recognizing the potential influences of their own belief and values. This awareness promotes a reflexive approach where the researcher is encouraged to interpret the data beyond their own perspective. Therefore, the researcher was mindful of their role in shaping the research, as they were responsible for formulating the questions and analyzing the data. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research, particularly in developing the interview guide, data collection, and in data analysis.

3.7 Operationalization

The interview guide was structured around six sections: 1. introduction, 2. cozy games, 3. gratification, 4. coping mechanism, 5. mental well-being, and 6. media dependency

(see Appendix A). Each section was tailored to explore distinct domains, effectively linking to the theoretical framework and research question.

The first section served as an introductory purpose, establishing rapport between the interviewer and interviewee through ice-breaking conversations and by explaining the reason behind choosing this research topic. This section did not have direct connection with the research question, thereby was kept short.

The second section 'cozy games' aimed to understand gamers perception of cozy games by focusing on the foundational elements including pillars and narratives that contribute to cozy games therapeutic potential. Cozy games are a sanctuary-like gaming experience, shielding gamers from pressures and threats, while immersing gamers in tranquility and nurturing them in safety in a soothing, charming, and playful environment abundant with resources and agency for creativity and crafting, resulting in a wholesome experience that fosters mental and moral well-being while indulging in play (Bodi, 2023b, p. 1; Cook et al., 2017, p. 1; M. Bloem, personal communication, February 29, 2024). Questions in this section explored the participants view on cozy games through foundational pillars and narratives, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the whole experience (see Appendix A).

The third section 'gratifications', aimed to delve deeper into understanding the motivations behind gamers playing cozy games and the satisfaction they derive from this engagement. This section also placed emphasis on how cozy games meets gamers' higher-order needs. Gratification is the satisfaction individuals experience when their needs are met that align their preconceived expectations (Menon, 2022a, p. 3). Drawing on Shin et al. (2021, p. 622) suggestion that gratification can be assessed by comparing expected outcomes with actual experiences, this section included questions about the reasons gamers engage in cozy games, their initial expectations, their actual experience, and their experience with in-games activities that link to higher-level and lower-level needs (see Appendix A).

The fourth section 'coping mechanism', aimed to delve into understanding how gamers use cozy games a coping mechanism. Coping mechanisms are psychological tools individuals use to deal with life stressors and promote mental well-being (Einav & Margalit, 2023, p. 1). There are two levels of coping: problem-focused coping to directly tackle the stressor, and emotion-focused coping to tackle the psychological maintenance in response to the stressor (Lee & Chen, 2023, p. 342). Questions in this section explored the different coping levels gamers experience with cozy games, how gamers experience escapism through

cozy games, and their perception of cozy games effectiveness as a coping mechanism (see Appendix A).

The fifth section 'mental well-being' was designed to explore gamers' perception of their mental well-being with cozy games. Mental well-being is an individual's capacity to cope with daily life stressors and function effectively in diverse aspects of life (Khalid & Syed, 2024, p. 2). It encompasses two prominent states of mind: a positive psychological state, characterized by the absence of depressive symptoms and the presence of joyful perspectives that enable daily functioning with a sense of purpose, whereas the negative psychological state represents the opposite (Di Cesare et al., 2023, p, 2; Kent, 2016, para. 1; Knight et al., 2022, para. 14; Wang et al., 2023, p. 1). Questions in this section explored gamer's self-assessment of their mental well-being before, during, and after engaging with cozy games, cozy game elements that contribute to mental state, and the mindful approach to cozy games (see Appendix A).

The last section 'media dependency' investigated gamers' reliance on cozy games as a coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being. Media dependency focuses on the dynamic between media and individuals, particularly on individuals reliance rate on media for achieving something (Zhang & Zhong, 2020 p. 3). The two levels of dependency are: psychological dependency, characterized by unconscious heavy dependence with negative consequences, and goal-oriented dependency, characterized by conscious use of media as a tool to fulfil specific objectives (Carillo et al., 2017, pp. 320-321). Questions in this section investigated how gamers awareness of their dependency, their self-assessment, and how they deal with dependency (see Appendix A).

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of this study aimed to understand how gamers perceive the use of cozy games to manage their mental well-being. The research focused on answering the question: *How do gamers perceive their experience of using cozy games as a coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being?*

The study involved a diverse group of eleven participants, including individuals in academia or young professionals from various countries such as China, The Netherlands, Sweden, Portugal, Germany, and England. These participants engaged with a range of cozy games, the varied game choices and participant backgrounds provided a rich context for analyses.

The data revealed three key themes essential to addressing the research question. The first theme, '*The Pursuit of Cozyness: Fulfilments & Drivers in Comforting Experiences*', explores what motivates gamers to start playing cozy games, the experience they acquire when engaging with cozy games, and how cozy games drives gamers to keep playing. The second theme, '*Meaningful Journey: Coping & Crafting Well-Being in Cozy Realms*', delves into gamers' transition from negative to positive mental states, examining how cozy games aid in coping, and mental healing through meaningful play. The final theme *'Navigating Dependency: Retreating & Re-Entering Cozy Escapes',* investigates how cozy games facilitate escapism for gamers and how gamers recognize and regulate their dependency to cozy games. The coding scheme and structure are detailed in Appendix D: Coding Tree.

4.1 The Pursuit of Cozyness: Fulfilments & Drivers in Comforting Experiences

4.1.1 Beyond Expectations: Unpacking Cozy Games Fulfilments

The need for fulfilment is a powerful driver of engagement in activities such as gaming. Fulfilment can be assessed by examining whether the experiences individuals obtain align with their initial expectations (Shin et al., 2021, p. 622). During the interviews, participants identified several needs they sought in cozy games, including relaxation, effortlessness, and captivating aesthetics.

Relaxations emerged as the primary motivator, cited by all eleven participants. For instance, participant BS mentioned "I'm primarily drawn to cozy games because of the calming, relaxing, and overall good feelings they evoke", and DT echoed this, noting "I just want to relax, so that motivates me". Effortlessness was also a significant need, with participants looking for games that do not require much energy. Participant NE described

playing cozy games as ideal when she's incredibly tired, seeking effortless engagement, AA noted the appeal of being able to engage in something easy that does not require much thought. Lastly, captivating aesthetics was also highlighted by four participants, who sought graphics that were comforting and immersive. Participant LT mentioned "The game's charming aesthetics, vibrant colors, and soothing background music" as essential for achieving a relaxed state.

Furthermore, while participants were initially drawn to play cozy games by their need for relaxation, effortlessness, and aesthetics, they often discovered that engaging with cozy games satisfied additional needs. Beyond the initial gratifications sought, participants also reported obtaining happiness, autonomy, lightness, and socialization – gratifications they did not anticipate obtaining before playing cozy games.

Many explained a feeling of mental 'blankness' that simplified decision-making. For example, participant AD noted "you can just chill and not have to be fully invested", and AA added "it starts with me not having to think much about what I am doing; it is just easy". Autonomy was another significant need they obtained. Participants felt empowered to make their own decisions without a set order, enhancing their sense of autonomy within the game. Participant AD expressed "you can do things your own way, which I really like about cozy games. It gives me control", NE echoed this sentiment "I am able to choose whether to engage with challenges or not, so I can spend my time exactly how I want". The element of happiness emerged from various aspects of cozy games. Participant AA felt the game was designed to evoke happiness, and other participants like LC mentioned "I just feel happy playing cozy games, because of everything happening in the game". Socialization, though not initially sought-after, became apparent as players engaged more with cozy games. Participant SJ discovered the joy of interacting with both friends and strangers online, stating "You can also interact with others, helping each other". Participant BS found that cozy games fostered a welcoming and inclusive community, which was especially beneficial as it provided a wholesome place where BS could connect with her sister, helping them grow closer. The combination of all these obtained needs made participants feel relaxed and experience a sense of lightness, enriching their engagement with cozy games.

Overall, these experiences not only met but exceeded participants' expectations, providing a deeper and more fulfilling engagement than initially anticipated. The fact that participants engaged with cozy games through their search for hedonic gratification confirms Lin's (1999, p. 204) notion that the selection process of usage is driven by purposeful motives. As Menon (2022a, p. 3) notes, when the obtained gratification aligns with or

surpasses initial expectations, fulfilment is achieved. In the context of cozy games, participants sought hedonic gratifications like relaxation, but also gained unexpected social and utilitarian gratifications, including sense of control, thereby enriching their gaming experience beyond mere leisure.

4.1.2 The Cozy Experience: Safety, Abundance, And Softness

Having established the gratifications sought and obtained from cozy games, it is crucial to explore the elements that evoke these feelings of fulfilment. By focusing on Cook et al. (2017, p. 1) cozy games pillars of abundance, safety, and softness, this research was able to understand how these elements contribute to the fulfilment experienced by participants.

Participants described their experience with in-game resources such as crafting materials and food as notably easy to acquire, creating a sense of having plentiful in-game supplies without constraints. Basic materials are highly accessible and scattered throughout the game. For instance, approaching a tree – a common element in cozy games – yields food and materials like wood. This abundance of resources provides a feeling of freedom and relaxation, removing any concerns about depleting supplies, as participants like LC noted "I think it is just in the wild or everywhere actually, it is widely available. It's basically given to you". Similarly, participant LT mentioned "getting resources in games can be very easy, […] you are placed in a world full of rocks, trees, and food for your characters to survive without any issue". Yet, participant NE highlighted an interesting aspect, while basic resources are readily available, there are rare items that can be tougher to obtain. However, cozy games still guide players in acquiring these rare items. The abundance of supply was found to encourage participants to experiment and take risks without the fear of losing resources. Participant RC for instance stated, "without worries of running short on something, because of the amount of material, one has a lot of room to make mistakes". Participant BS added "having an excessive number of resources provides freedom to experiment and make choices without worrying about running out of materials". Moreover, this abundance also facilitated capitalist actions, to trade and accumulate, enhancing player engagement and satisfaction. Thus, abundance fosters safety for participants to focus on higher-level creative and social interactions, rather than mere survival, aligning with Cook et al. (2017, p. 1) abundance notion in cozy games.

Building on the sense of abundance, the pillar of safety in cozy games provides players with a comforting and worry-free experience. All eleven participants reported a

consistent feeling of ease throughout their gameplay. This sense of safety aligns with Cook et al. (2017, p. 1), who suggest that safety is characterized by the absence of penalties, threats, risks, or danger in cozy games. For example, participant AA noted "as soon as you start playing, you feel immediately at ease". Participants like RC attributed their sense of security to several game design features: the absence of warfare, the straightforwardness of gameplay, non-aggressive environment, and a lack of time pressure. Three participants mentioned minimal threat from isolated enemies in certain game areas, which were easy to defeat giving players autonomy and voluntariness. Participant NE explained "typically, these enemies are confined to specific sections of the game. This setup allows players to choose whether they want to engage with these challenges or not, and generally they are easy to defeat". Many participants felt that the simplicity and straightforwardness of cozy game mechanics make them beginner friendly, further enhancing the sense of comfort. NE describes the games "It's straightforward and the game guides you by holding your hand", similarly BS said, "cozy games, in my view, are beginner-friendly and provide ample space for enjoyment". The predictability and repetitiveness of tasks were also cited as sources of comfort and safety. Participant RC found reassurance in routine "doing the same thing repeatedly brings me a sense of safety", and NE valued the predictable nature of tasks like farming noting "the familiarity of the routine provides a sense of comfort and relaxation". The abundance of resources further contributed to a relaxed attitude towards potential losses, with participant MB remarking "you don't have much to lose, like dying in cozy games you can often come back easily". As a result of these features, players felt encouraged to experiment, take risks, and engage in trial and error without fear of severe consequences. This freedom allows players to explore and enjoy the game environment thoroughly, leading to a deeper and more satisfying gaming experience.

Moreover, having explored how the elements of abundance and safety contribute to player comfort and security, attention now shifts to the pillar of softness. This pillar focuses on the role of graphics and sound in cozy games (Cook et al. 2017, p. 1). When participants were asked about the art styles and sounds in cozy games, participants reported getting feelings of positivity, under stimulation, and welcomeness. Participants attributed the positive atmosphere to the cheerful characters, soft color, and uplifting music. Participant SJ noted "the color and happy villagers immediately give off good vibes. It is not always super colorful, but there is a brightness and a sense of happiness that just jumps out at you", while AA added "the cartoon characters, even the animals, usually have a smile. I think many elements in the game are designed to stimulate happiness". The under stimulation provided

by the game's aesthetics also played a significant role. Participants appreciated the simplicity and clarity of the visuals, which MB compared to children's drawing. Participant LT described the under stimulation as stemming from the design's delightfulness as "non-intrusive graphics without sharp contrasts that could be jarring. The user interface is well-integrated; it's present without being overpowering, allowing for an uncluttered experience". Additionally, participant RC noted that the art style and music contributed to her feeling less anxious. This observation aligns with Waszkiewicz & Bakun (2020, pp. 226-227) theory that the softness in cozy games helps reduce or eliminate anxiety. When looking at the feeling of welcoming, this was fostered by the combination of art style and in-game element. Participant DT remarked "cozy games are generally small, cute, and I would say, wholesome in a warm, comforting way. The visuals are often soft and inviting". The soft visuals, the beginner friendliness, and the use of animals – perceived as symbols of innocence – contributed to this welcoming environment feel. As a result of these calming and inviting elements, players reported taking actions such as playing game music in the background during other activities to maintain a sense of happiness and comfort. Participant SJ explained "I'll put on a 10-hour YouTube mix of the game's songs. It helps me relax and zone out a bit while I'm working".

Overall, the data gathered from participants illustrates that the pillars of cozy games, initially perceived as standalone elements that contribute to the cozy experience (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1), can be deeply intertwined. This observation suggests that each pillar enhances each other: safety lays the groundwork for a worry-free performance, abundance ensures that players have the necessary resources to act freely without concern, and softness envelops players in an environment of positivity. Together these elements synergistically foster a profound sense of relaxation among participants which they initially sought for.

4.1.3 Balancing Drivers: Unpacking Motivators in Cozy Games

Having explored the gratifications that draw players to cozy games and the experiences that fulfil them, the focus now shifts to what sustains their engagement and what factors may diminish it. This section delves into why players continue to immerse themselves in these games and the challenges that could deter them from continuing to play. According to Maslow (1943, pp. 5-6), lower-level needs need to be satisfied before higher-level needs can become driving factors. Yet, Cook et al.'s (2017, p. 3) claim that while cozy games adept at fulfilling these lower-level needs, when cozy games mechanics focus to heavily on lower-level needs, it can strip away the motivation. Interestingly, during the interviews, participants

described how cozy games balanced these higher-level and lower-level motivating factors to continue playing.

During the interviews it was identified that lower-level needs often motivate participants to keep playing through gentle challenges. These challenges, such as swimming competitions or bug catching, do not carry severe consequences, thus maintaining the game's relaxed atmosphere with a twist of excitement. For instance, participant SJ noted "the mini-challenges, like hide-n-seek with a villager introduces a bit of pressure, which adds an exciting element to the gameplay". Similarly, LC added "the little challenges are very important to have because they give you the small rush of excitements and contribute to my sense of achieving something". Also, the inclusion of easy beginner-friendly monsters was adding a layer of gentle excitement without posing major obstacles, as NE described "[…] they are designed more as a gentle challenge that adds a bit of excitement rather than a major obstacle". Yet, AD pointed out that when these gentle challenges are too hard it can lead to demotivation and frustration "When the challenges are too hard, it just becomes demotivating and makes me want to stop playing". Another motivating factor related to lower-level needs is monetization. Three participants expressed satisfaction with how easy it was to earn money within the game, which empowered them to want to achieve more. Participant RC shared "I feel really good when I earn money". Conversely, the introduction of real-money transactions was found to detract the cozy game experience and demotivate players. For example, participant AA expressed dissatisfaction with this model, saying "I really dislike when to advance beyond a certain point you must pay. It completely removes any sense of cozyness for me".

Given the above, participants' experiences with lower-level both align with and challenge Cook et al.'s (2017, p. 2) notion regarding the use of lower-level needs in cozy games mechanics. While participants often felt demotivated when these needs were implemented in a demanding manner, they also reported that when these needs were addressed gently and aligned with cozy pillars, they added a motivating and charming dimension that contrast with Cook et al.'s notion.

Furthermore, during the interviews, participants highlighted various motivating factors related to higher-level needs that encouraged continued engagement with cozy games. A prominent factor was the sense of accomplishment, which participants experienced from diverse perspectives. Some players by completing collections, earning badges, while others found joy in decorating their islands and homes to their liking. For instance, participant DT mentioned "seeing when I get achievements and a badge", BS shared "It's incredibly

rewarding for me in when I finish designing my island and house", and SJ "when you complete small challenges, like finally getting your island a five-star rating gives me a good sense of achievement". Another significant motivator was self-actualization, where players were able to learn, progress and achieve within the game, enhancing their sense of personal growth. However, participants also noted that when cozy games lack updated content, the sense of progression stalls, leading to feelings of monotony and removing the desire to continue playing. Participant LC illustrated this by saying "If the game is not updated anymore, then it takes the element of excitement away. Knowing that you have done everything, then there is not much to do anymore". Similarly, SJ noted "Once I had my island set up and all my villagers in place, there wasn't much left to do, so I stopped playing. Essentially, if a game stops adding new features, that is usually why I would stop playing". Yet, interestingly, two participants found the monotony and repetitiveness comforting and safe, which did motivate them to continue playing. Lastly, relationship building was frequently mentioned as a factor for prolonged gameplay. Various participants enjoyed fostering relationships with the characters in cozy games. However, some participant became terribly upset when these relationships were broken. Participant NE describes a highly demotivating experience "one of the most demotivating experiences I have had is when it made me feel like I was constantly losing friends. This really upset me. Since I tend to form strong attachments to characters very quickly, losing them in the game felt like losing real friends. It was deeply saddening and turned me off from that game".

Reflecting on the higher-level needs results, it is clear that participants could engage in accomplishments, relationship building, and self-actualization because the cozy game pillar already fulfils their lower-level needs (Maslow, 1943, pp. 5-6). While these higher-level needs motivate continued play, their application from a none-cozy perspective can also demotivate players from continues engagement.

Overall, the data gathered indicates that it is not straightforward whether over implementation of lower-level mechanics in cozy games is consistently demotivating, challenging Cook et al.'s (2017, p. 3) assertion. Participants enjoy a balance of motivators that address both higher and lower-level needs. Additionally, this section reveals that when motivators addressing higher-level needs are misapplied, they can significantly impact players due to the high value these players place on these achievements. Conversely, while misapplying motivators that address lower-level needs can be demotivating, their impact is less severe, as these needs can be easily replenished through the pillar of cozy games.

4.1.4 Summary

In summary, this chapter explores the fulfilment and motivations experienced by gamers when engaging with cozy games. Participants were engaged with cozy games in search of hedonic gratifications, but also gained unexpected social and utilitarian gratifications that exceeded their expectations, providing a deeper and more fulfilling engagement than initially anticipated.

The pillars of cozy games – abundance, safety, and softness – significantly contributed to these feelings of fulfilment. These pillars are deeply intertwined, enhancing each other, safety provides a worry-free environment, abundance ensure the freedom to experiment, and softness creates a positive atmosphere. Together, these elements synergistically foster the profound sense of relaxation participants initially sought.

Lastly, over implementation of lower-level motivators is not always demotivating, as higher-level motivators can also impact players continued engagement with cozy games. Misapplying higher-level motivators can significantly impact players due to the high value participants place on achievements, while misapplied lower-level motivators are less severe as they can be easily replenished.

4.2 Meaningful Journey: Coping & Crafting Well-Being in Cozy Realms

4.2.1 Coping Through Play: Cozy Games for Relief

Having explored what drives players to engage with cozy games, this section examines their use as a coping mechanism. Usage patterns are analyzed to understand when participants typically turn to cozy games, and the intentions behind their choices. Additionally, this section explores the effectiveness of cozy games as coping mechanism by examining their functionality, applicability, and how they compare to other coping strategies participants have used.

When asked if they turn to cozy during tough times, all eleven participants affirmed they do, citing emotional triggers such as stress, fatigue, pressure, bad memories, sadness, loneliness, or anxiety that make them turn to cozy games. These triggers align with negative psychological states as identified by Wang et al. (2023, p. 1). Participants specifically turn to cozy games because these games provide an immersive escape into a world that contrasts sharply to their challenging realities. Unlike their daily environments, cozy games do not impose pressure, allowing participants to relax and find relief. For instance, participant AS noted "during periods of heightened anxiety or stress cozy games provide a much-needed

escape from reality", and AA added "If things become overwhelming. In such moments, playing games helps me calm down and shift my focus, providing a much-needed sense of relief". Interestingly, most participants initially made a conscious choice to engage with cozy games as coping strategy. Only two described their decision as initially unconscious, which quickly became conscious after experiencing the benefits. For example, participant DT explained "I was not consciously choosing cozy games for stress relief; it happened naturally. Over time, I've realized that cozy games have been more helpful during tough times. Now, I consciously decide to set time for cozy games to unwind". Similarly, participants NE stated, "I feel that when I play cozy games, I know what I'm getting myself into". This transition from an unconscious to conscious coping strategy demonstrates the certainty participants acquire from cozy experience, encouraging their repeated engagement. This deliberate use of cozy games to feel better aligns with Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022, p. 129) notion that effective coping mechanism provide solace. Indeed, participants report that cozy games not only allow them to manage stress but also to experience comfort and solace.

Moreover, participants also discussed the effectiveness of cozy games as coping mechanism. Initially, four participants viewed the games primally as a mean to reduce stress levels, serving as an emotion-focused coping function, as described by Lee and Chen (2023, p. 342). Participant RC noted "It becomes my way of transferring my stress on to the game and come out better, because it's just so relaxing and feels like a mental break". Over time other participants noticed a shift; as they returned to work with a clearer mind, they recognized that stress was not just an annoyance but a significant issue on its own. By acknowledging stress as an issue on its own, three participants began to appreciate cozy games for both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategy. For instance, participant BS elaborated "cozy games serve as a distraction during times of emotional stress. After some time immersed in the gentle world of a cozy games, you might find that you return to the issue with a clearer, enabling rational thinking and effective problem-solving". Similarly, SJ observed "It starts with it being a distraction, but once I start playing, I start feeling happy and relaxed, and then it helps me with the issue".

Furthermore, cozy games in comparison to other coping mechanism participants noted that cozy games offer a reliable sense of happiness and ease of engagement, providing a predictable and continuous experience unlike movies or books, which require initial investment and carry uncertainty about enjoyment. For instance, AA stated "with books or movies you do not know what you are expecting you do not know how it will end. Cozy games however, you already know how it's going to end because there is no ending, it gives

me certainty and comfort". Participant DT added "I love reading, but it can be draining because it involves processing so many words". Social media as another form of coping mechanism, two participants felt like they were relaxing but wasting their time. Whereas with cozy games it made them feel like they are achieving something while relaxing. Participant LC expressed "spending hours scrolling through TikTok I feel relax but it's such a waste of time, but with cozy games I feel like I'm doing something productive, and I feel relaxed". Participant AS stated a preference for cozy games as her primary coping mechanism because they engage multiple senses namely hearing, touch, sight, unlike books or movies, which engage fewer. This preference aligns with Lee and Chen (2023, p. 342) assertion that the interactivity of gaming significantly enhances enjoyment as a coping strategy.

When looking at the applicability of cozy games as coping mechanism. Eight participants recommended trying cozy games for stress relief but noted the importance of considering individual circumstances. Participant AA explained "It depends on the stress if they are stressed for a deadline, definitely not. If they are stressed because they are waiting for a test result than yes". Other participants like NE highlighted that the effectiveness also depends on a person's familiarity with gaming "If they are a gamer then absolutely, I think they would enjoy them. However, for someone who doesn't usually play games, it might not be the best fit". Lastly, two participants cautioned to the type of cozy games chosen, as some might carry dark topics that might cause stress. This is closely related to dissonant narratives cozy games that combine cozy aesthetic with tough topics like grief (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, pp. 233-234).

Overall, this finding demonstrates cozy games' multifaceted utility in managing stress and enhancing mental well-being. Participants consistently turn to cozy games during challenging times, drawn by their predictable and engaging nature which contrast with uncertainties of other entertainment forms. Cozy games are appreciated for their potential of dual functionality in providing both emotional relief and practical problem-solving functionality to participants, proving to be valuable tool for coping.

4.2.2 Mental Well-Being Unlocked: The Transformative Power of Cozy Games

Having explored how participants use cozy games as coping mechanism, this section delves into their mental states before, during, and after interacting with cozy games. Additionally, it describes the long-term and short-term psychological benefits that arises from participants exiting cozy games.

Before engaging with cozy games, ten participants described their mental state as sad, bored, anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed – characteristics associated with negative psychological state (Di Cesare et al., 2023, p. 2). Participant AS reported a sense of heaviness, DT shared "before I start playing a cozy game, I'm stressed or upset", while AD added "I go into the game usually feeling stressed or sad". However, participants AA mentioned that although she often feels sad before playing, there are times when she simply feels the need to play. Additionally, two participants emphasized that their minds could become so overwhelmed that it disabled their ability to focus on work, aligning with the negative psychological state that can disrupt ones capacity to effectively function (Kent, 2016, para. 1).

During the gameplay, participants reported feeling a mental shift while engaging with cozy games. Participants described becoming so deeply immersed that they felt mentally transported to another place, leading to a noticeable decrease in stress levels and an increase in happiness. Some even reported feeling emotionally neutral due to the depth of their immersion, experiencing a substantial reduction in negative emotions and increase in relaxation. For example, participant BS noted "I find myself becoming deeply engrossed in the gameplay, which distracts me from my stress. The overwhelming feelings begins to decrease as I focus on the game". Similarly, DT commented "as I play, I gradually calm down because the game helps me shift my focus away from my worries to what's happening in the game". Participants attributed this decrease in negative psychological states to elements associated to the cozy games' pillars. Such as the visual appeal of the game, optimistic characters, and soothing music were all cited as factors that contribute to a feeling of positivity. As participant SJ noted "[…] because of all the fun and cute things I get to do in the game that enhances my mood", illustrating how cozy games leverage their pillars to help shift players to a more positive psychological state.

After gameplay, all eleven participants reported exiting cozy games feeling relaxed, relieved, recharged, calm, rested, and mentally lightweight, reflecting a shift to a positive psychological state that aligns with Di Cesare et al. (2023, p. 2) notion. Participant BS described this sensation vividly "after I pause or stop playing for the day, there is a noticeable lightness. It is as if I have shed a significant weight that was pressing on my shoulders, heart, and head. I can finally breathe and take a moment to relax". Similarly, participant AS added "I always feel lighter. It is like a recharge for my mind and spirit".

Furthermore, participants also elaborated how cozy games provide them with valuable psychological benefits that manifest in two keyways: short-term and long-term effects. In the

short-term, the decrease in stress and clarity of mind improved their capacity to handle daily tasks. For example, participant LC noted "I can go back with a fresher perspective and focus better on your daily task", while LT mentioned "I feel content and as if a weight has been lifted". However, the relief was sometimes short-lived, with stressors eventually causing their mental state to revert. Participant AD remarked "I come out feeling refreshed, but then reality hits and I'm back to square one". Participant DT echoes this sentiment stating "I feel calm for a while, but the worries do tend to return eventually. It is a temporary distraction, but a helpful one". Regarding the long-term effects, exiting cozy games often provided participants with mental clarity enabling them to reassess their challenges and realize that some issues were less daunting than perceived. This reflection promoted a healthier perspective on problem solving that participants were able to take for future life challenges. Participant DT expressed this feeling by "Interestingly, playing these games also helps me come to terms with the fact that I can't always fix everything".

Overall, this section reveals that cozy games can transform players' mental states from negative to positive, enabling them to function more effectively and return to daily challenges with a refreshed perspective. The post-game mental clarity participants experience not only align with positive psychological state identified by Di Cesare et al. (2023, p. 2), but can also foster a moment of self-reflection that enhances their consciousness about personal situations. Such insights can empower players to handle future challenges with a renewed sense of capability and healthier approach to problem-solving.

4.2.3 Beyond Fun: The Art of Meaningful Play in Cozy Games

Exploring how cozy games fosters positive psychological states, this section examines participants insights into how cozy games mechanics enhance their psychological state. Participant experiences highlighted key aspects that promote personal development through meaningful play: environmental safety, reflection, self-discovery, and educational elements.

Cozy games uniquely foster a sense of nurturance by creating environments where players feel secure (Cook et al., 2017, p. 1). Participants highlighted how cozy games convey a sense of safety, not just from threats but also from judgement, enabling them to heal. As participant NE noted "I feel no pressure from the judgement of other people", and LT explained that "Cozy games provide me with the space to process what's happening, offering some clarity and perspective".

Within these environments participants are exposed to explicit and subtle messages that unconsciously help enhance personal growth. For instance, while engaging in cozy

games with coherent narratives participants claimed to unconsciously be absorbed in the underlying themes such as 'journey into independence' or 'journey into adulthood' as noted by participants LC and AS. Nine participants admitted that they are not aware of these messages until they were pointed out, but they agreed that there are valuable takeaways. However, some participants indicated that certain cozy games convey explicit messages. Participant DT and BS explained that Spiritfarer presents a clear and impactful theme like dealing with grief (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020). These cozy games with explicit message are what Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020. pp. 233-234) call dissonant narratives that expose players to challenging topics. Through these messages participants were able to achieve personal growth by reflecting within a nurturing environment that provides the space to process these themes.

Furthermore, interviews indicated that cozy games contribute significantly to personal growth by promoting self-discovery. Participants were encouraged to try activities beyond their usual interest, leading them to step out of their comfort zones and explore new possibilities. Their exploration helped participants try and discover new career paths, lifestyles, culinary styles, and hobbies. For instance, LT was inspired to try architecture after playing The Sims, and NE appreciated how cozy games provided insights into lifestyles that are inaccessible. Other participants like DT were inspired to bake, SJ was inspired to visit museums, and RC to try fishing. This self-discovery aligns with Cook et al. (2017, p. 2) that within cozy games players can try out scenarios and activities that are not always possible in reality.

Additionally, it was found that participants could engage in meaningful play through the integration of realistic elements within cozy games, which, when combined with play, facilitated fun educational moments. Various element within cozy games, such as flower, stones, insects, fish, animals, arts, reflect real-life counterparts, allowing participants to recognize and explore these elements further within the game. For example, participant RC noted "the game is based on real species, so I have learned a lot about them. Whenever I catch a new type of fish, I google it to see how it looks and gather more information.

However, while all eleven participants emphasized that while they value the personal growth from exposure to messages, self-discovery, reflection, and educational elements, they view personal growth as a secondary benefit of cozy games. The primary appeal, they argue lies in the fun and enjoyment, with personal growth being a great bonus. For example, DT expressed this through "I play these games because I want to have fun. The fact that they

might also offer a message about personal growth is just a bonus—it is not the main reason I play".

Overall, cozy games provide a safe and nurturing environment that enhances personal growth while offering enjoyment. These games foster self-discovery, skill development, reflection, and educational moments, as noted by Cook et al. (2017, p. 2) and further supported by Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020. pp. 233-234). While the primary appeal of these games lies in their fun and entertaining nature, the added element of meaningful play enriches the gaming experience. This not only enhances both enjoyment and personal development, but also fosters a sense of achievement and positive psychological mindset, thereby improving players mental well-being.

4.2.4 Summary

In summary, this chapter explored the multifaceted utility of cozy games as coping mechanism to enhance participants' mental wellbeing in enabling participants to enhance their mental state through meaningful play. Participants often consciously turned to cozy games during challenging times, drawn by their predictable nature. Cozy games offer a reliable comforting escape that contrasts with the uncertainties of other entrainment forms, providing both emotional-focused coping as well as problem-focused coping to help relief stress.

Before engaging with cozy games, participants were often in negative psychological states. However, upon engagement, they experienced a significant shift to a positive psychological state, feeling relieved and calm. This positive state fostered both short-term and long-term effects, helping them return to daily challenges with a refreshed perspective and enhanced mental resilience.

This shift was fostered through meaningful play mechanics in cozy games, where players can grow and heal as they play. The safe and nurturing environments in cozy games enhance mental well-being by providing growth through educational elements, reflection, and self-discovery. While the primary appeal of cozy games is having fun, the added element of growth enriches the gaming experience, fostering a sense of achievement and positive psychological state.

4.3 Navigating Dependency: Retreating & Re-Entering Cozy Escapes

4.3.1 Escapism realm: Crafting Virtual Dreams in Cozy Games

This section explores how cozy games facilitates escapism, immersing players deeply into their virtual world. Participants often described becoming fully engrossed into the world of cozy games, transporting them away from reality and into enchanting virtual environment.

Participants attributed their sense of escapism in cozy games to various aspects, one of them being the immersive graphics and music. Five participants particularly emphasized that the rich graphics of the environment, animation, characters, enhance their sense of being immersed. For example, participant AD noted "the graphics contribute a lot to the relaxing vibe of the game. It feels nice to explore visually appealing environments. You can climb to mountain tops and just immerse in the views of the entire map". Music also plays a vital role, providing a soothing backdrop that complements the visuals elements and deepens the immersion. Participant LT explained "the music is essential for setting the mood and immersing me in the game", participant BS echoed this "[…] immerse myself in its captivating soundtrack—it is exceptional. Music plays a vital role in my cozy gaming experience". Interestingly, two participants highlighted that the combination of both visuals and music is key to achieving a full sense of escapism. Participant LC noted "I think it's the combination of the animation and the theme songs that you all see and hear when you start playing that help me immerse faster into the game", SJ added "cozy game's visual elements and sounds from the game itself, enhances the overall experience of escape". The collective impact of visuals and music elements support the assertions by Di Cesare et al. (2023, p. 6) that gaming's aesthetics and musical design are instruments in aiding players in coping, by facilitating a deep dive into a virtual reality.

Furthermore, Bodi (2023b, p. 1-2) suggest that the agency granted to gamers in cozy games provide a sense of control, facilitating an escape from real-life anxieties. Participants described various scenarios where they felt ownership and autonomy, enhancing their sense of agency, and deepening their escapism, aligning with Bodi's agency theory.

During the interviews participants highlighted the autonomy they experience in cozy games, describing how they can dictate their gameplay by choosing their own paths, setting their own pace, and engaging in preferred tasks. Participant AS described the autonomous feeling as "cozy games allow us to create and control our own gameplay narratives, providing a sense of agency and an escape from daily stresses. Such games serve a dual purpose: enable us to craft personal stories while also offering an escape". Ownership in these games often

translates to a personal connection with the game's content. Terms like "own" and "mine" frequently surfaced during interviews, as participants felt what they were doing within the game was uniquely theirs. The uniqueness was enhanced as participants were able to craft their own stories or design their own homes and lifestyles exactly as they desired. For example, participant RC stated "it allows me to create and customize in my own way. I can design and expand my home", and NE added "It's just easy to get into because it's my own worlds", and LT explained "making me feel as though I'm actively participating in my own, stress-free story". This blend of autonomous decision-making and the sense of ownership fosters a creative agency that enables participants to immerse themselves in an escape to a virtual world they consider their own within cozy games.

Moreover, through the creative agency granted by cozy games, participants were able to immerse in unattainable dreams, such as becoming a billionaire or owning a farm, thus deepening their escapism through aspirational play. This further reinforces Bodi's (2023b, p. 1-2) assertion that agency fosters escapism. Cozy games remove financial constraints and risk, that enabled participants to indulge in alternate realities. For instance, AA mentioned "I cannot build a house in real life I do not have the money. I cannot start a farm in real life that easy as well because that also you need money and a lot of land, so it is nice to try this in cozy games". Similarly, SJ shared "the things I do in cozy games like being a billionaire or having a mansion are things you might dream about in real life".

Overall, this section has shown how cozy games create unique realm of escapism, where players can immerse themselves into virtual worlds shaped by their aspirations. Through immersive graphics, soothing music, and the agency to craft personal narratives, players immerse deeply within these enchanting environments. These experiences enhance players' mental well-being by providing a meaningful escape from daily stresses, and into a virtual reality that they see as their own.

4.3.2 Dependency Dynamics & Awareness: Balancing Cozy Games with Reality

Having explored how cozy games enable players to immerse themselves and escape reality to support their mental well-being, this section examines participants reliance on cozy games.

During the interviews, it was evident that cozy games generally met participants expectations, encouraging their return. The Media System Dependency Theory posits that when a media adequately fulfils individuals' needs and expectation, it can foster a dependent relationship between the individual and the media (Carillo et al., 2017, p. 320). Delving

deeper into the two levels of dependence, all eleven participants indicated that they initially played with the intention of getting lost in the game, a sign of psychological dependency – associated with high dependency level (Carillo et al., 2017, p. 320). However, participants noted that once they engaged with cozy games, they felt more relaxed and would return to cozy games with a different mindset, specifically with the goal to relax. This behavior aligns with goal-oriented dependency – associated with low dependency level (Carillo et al., 2017, p. 320). For example, participant AD explained "just getting lost and then relaxing just happens", and DT added "I like to get lost in it and become distracted from the real world, and through that I relax. So now if I want to relax, I know I can go play a bit of cozy games". This indicates that participants did not exhibit a clear level of dependency. Instead, they explained how one supports the other: they get lost to achieve their goal of relaxing, which is a potential for a third type of dependency level that Carillo et al. (2017, p. 320) did not address.

Additionally, to further understand participants reliance to cozy games, all participants were asked about the significance of these games for mental well-being. Each participant acknowledged that cozy games are valuable and play a key role in supporting their mental well-being. However, they also noted that the support provided by cozy games is replaceable and does not substitute professional medical help. While recognizing the positive impact of cozy games, participants viewed them as one of several valuable alternatives for stress relief. For instance, participant NE stated "cozy games are important to me, they serve as a strategic way to unwind and manage stress. Yet, I believe if I did not have cozy games, something else would take their place". Similarly, AS explained "cozy games are indeed valuable for finding mental peace, but they're not the sole solution". These perspectives further clarified that while participants enjoy cozy games, they do not rely solely on these games to enhance their mental well-being. All these perspectives indicate that participants are not reliant on cozy games, and they can use different methods to enhance their mental well-being.

Furthermore, while discussing the value of cozy games for mental well-being, it emerged that participants engagement with cozy games has decreased over time due to increased responsibilities including work, school, and family. Participant AD remarked, "less now because work and other responsibilities", and BS noted "because of life I have more responsibilities, it has become less, but it is still consistent". Although participants do not play as frequently as before, they maintain a consistent pattern, primarily using games to relax. This further demonstrates that participants do not have a psychological dependency on

cozy games, as they can reduce their playing time while still using the games at a lower frequency for relaxation. This indicates that participants carry a more goal-oriented mindset (Carillo et al., 2017, p. 320).

Moreover, it is evident that participants value cozy games for relaxation and enhancing mental well-being. Participants were asked how they ensure these games positively affect their mental well-being without hindering daily tasks, namely management strategies. Participants like SJ, BS and AD prioritize life responsibilities before playing. Participant SJ noted "I prioritize work first because otherwise, I'd feel stressed if I didn't complete my tasks". Another strategy involves treating cozy games as a reward after completing daily responsibilities, as NE explained "essentially, I view gaming as a treat after completing my day's responsibilities". Time constraints were another common strategy. Participants set specific times for gaming to maintain balance. For instance, participant RC mentioned "I usually play for a short time like 20 to 30 minutes", while AS said "By establishing a routine of playing for one to two hours in the evening". Most interestingly, the last strategy is the protection of the experience. Participants would avoid playing during extremely tough, sad, or stressed times, to prevent negative association with the game. Participant AA claimed, "I try to not associate cozy games with something bad or not fun, so I give it time pauses". This strategy helps maintain the games as a source of joy and relaxation, ensuring they remain a positive escape.

Overall, this section demonstrates that participants strategically use cozy games for relaxation within a framework of responsible usage. They adeptly manage their gaming time to support their personal and professional obligation by employing management strategies to create balance. Through their perspective on importance of cozy games for mental well-being and their practices for balancing gaming with life illustrates the goal-oriented dependency framework posited by Carillo et al. (2017, p. 320). Thereby underscoring participants ability to integrate gaming into their lives in a way that supports their overall mental well-being.

4.3.3 Summary

In summary, this chapter explored how games facilitates escapism and balance dependency to cozy games with reality. Cozy games immerse players deeply into virtual worlds, providing a comforting escape through immersive graphics and music, creating an enchanting environment. The agency and boundless possibilities granted allows them to control their experiences and alternate realities, fostering a sense of ownership and personal

connection. This autonomy enables players to craft their own narratives, deepening their immersion in comforting escapes that enhances their mental well-being.

Participants have a goal-oriented dependency on cozy games, managing their gaming time responsibly by prioritizing responsibilities, treating gaming as a reward, setting time limits, and protecting the game experience from negative associations. Initially, participants played to get lost in the game (psychological dependency), but they kept returning with the goal to relax (goal-oriented dependency). Cozy games are integrated into their lives to as one of the options to support their daily lives and enhance their mental well-being effectively.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, the research concludes by offering a comprehensive answer to the research question, detailed in the sub-chapter 'Addressing the Research Question'. Subsequently, the 'Implications' sub-chapter explores the significance of the findings within scientific and societal contexts. The 'Limitations' sub-chapter discusses the shortcomings of this research, highlighting areas of potential improvement. Finally, the 'Recommendations' sub-chapter proposes suggestions for future research, aiming to further build upon the foundations laid by this study.

5.1 Addressing the Research Question

The results of this study have extensively explored how gamers perceive cozy games as an effective coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being. It has become evident that cozy games transcend their entertainment value by serving as therapeutic tool, significantly enhancing players mental well-being.

Players purposively engage with cozy games in search of hedonic gratification and come out with experiences that exceed their expectations by also gaining social and utilitarian gratifications. Cozy games provide a profound sense of meaningful escape from stressors of daily life, offering a sanctuary where players can relax, unwind and engaging in wholesome gameplay. This form of meaningful escapism is not simply a distraction; it is a transformative experience where players encounter elements from the real-world, enjoy autonomy, and indulge in numerous possibilities to learn, grow, and enhance their mental well-being through play. Through immersive environments built upon safety, abundance, and softness cozy games synergistically create a space where players feel mentally supported and free from pressure of external realities that enable them to relax.

Furthermore, players turn to cozy games during challenging times because of the certainty that they will feel mentally lighter, in contrast to other coping mechanisms with uncertain outcomes. Through cozy games players experience psychological benefits that can extend beyond temporary relief, such as a significant enhancement in their ability to handle life's challenges with a more refreshed and balanced perspective post-gameplay. Whereby cozy games can assist in both emotional coping to manage stress that disrupts their ability to work, and problem-focused coping by reducing stress, thereby enabling players to address issues more effectively after playing. The players experience short-term benefits such as immediate stress reduction and a boost in happiness, while long-term benefits included

mental resilience and a healthier reflective approach to dealing with personal and professional stressors. Players delve into cozy games for the pursuit of relaxation, and the added element of meaningful play that promotes a positive psychological state is a bonus that enriches their experience.

Moreover, while players highly value the added benefit of cozy games for managing mental well-being, they do not consider them the sole solution. Instead, cozy games are part of a broader spectrum of coping mechanisms. Through their goal-oriented dependency players recognize their responsibilities in life and prioritize personal circumstances over playing cozy games. They use cozy games to support their daily responsibilities and priorities, adopting a balanced approach to usage to still indulge in the mental well-being enhancement provided by these games.

All in all, the perceptions and experience gathered from cozy gamers strongly affirm that cozy games can be a vital component of their coping repertoire, offering both immediate and enduring benefits for mental well-being. These games not only provide temporary relief from stress, but also aid in the cultivation of healthier, more resilient psychological state, enhancing overall life satisfaction and mental well-being. This study not only answers the research question but also paves the way for further research into the specific attributions of cozy games that function as coping mechanism to nurture a positive mental well-being state through play.

5.2 Scientific Implications

Reflecting on the established theoretical framework, the findings of this research not only supported several of the discussed theories but also challenged different perspectives and suggest alternative approaches. This variance enriches our understanding and underscores the complexity of cozy games in relation to mental well-being.

Beginning with Cook et al. (2017, p. 1), who state that cozy games foster a cozy feeling through three pillars: safety, abundance, and softness. Throughout the interviews, participants' definitions of what constitutes cozy games aligned closely with Cook et al. 's (2017, p. 1) description. However, it was also found that these pillars collectively foster a specific feeling for players, namely the feeling of 'relaxation' sought in cozy games – a detail not mentioned by Cook et al. 's (2017, p. 1).

Another theory heavily embedded in cozy games is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which delineates human needs across hierarchical levels (Mcleod, 2018, p. 1). This research

supports Maslow's notion that individuals can only focus on higher-level needs once their lower-level needs are met (Maslow, 1943, pp. 5-6). This research confirmed this by participants sharing their experiences of building relationships, decorating, self-discovery, self-actualization, and more. These activities were possible because their lower-level needs within cozy games were easily fulfilled, thereby supporting Maslow's theory.

However, Cook et al. 's (2017, p. 3) argue that when cozy games are overly embedded with lower-level mechanics, players can become demotivated. This research challenges that claim through participants experience by suggesting that to prolong continuous engagement a balance of both lower-level and higher-level motivators are needed. While an excess of lower-level motivators can be demotivating, the misuse of higher-level motivators can have a more severe negative impact on players.

Moreover, Lee and Chen (2023, p. 342) as well as Pearce et al. (2022, p. 774) suggest that individuals can employ either emotion-focused coping or problem-focused coping. This research demonstrates that coping methods are personal and not always clear-cut. Individuals often simultaneously employed both forms of coping in cozy games to destress and approach issues with a fresher perspective, thereby enhancing their mental well-being. Additionally, cozy games enabled individuals to achieve a clear mindset, helping them recognize that stress itself is a significant problem, this finding also challenges Lee and Chen (2023, p. 342) as well as Pearce et al. (2022, p. 774), suggesting that emotions can also fall under problem-focused coping.

Another theory challenged by this research is the Media System Dependency Theory, which identifies two distinct levels of dependency indicating the extent to which individuals use media: psychological dependency and goal-oriented dependency (Carillo et al., 2017, pp. 320-321). This research demonstrates that individuals do not strictly adhere to either of these levels of dependency. Instead, individuals have the capacity to leverage both levels to achieve their goals. For instance, individuals employ the psychological dependency tactic of 'getting lost' in the game to achieve their goal of relaxation, a characteristic associated with goal-oriented dependency.

Through these scientific implications this study not only supports the therapeutic potential of gaming noted by Chan et al. (2022, p. 127) as well as Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, pp. 2-3) but also enriches the academic discussion on cozy games being as a tool for mental well-being. This research actively contributes to filling the identified research gap in academic studies on cozy games identified by The University of Pennsylvania (2023, para.

5), by providing empirical evidence that cozy games can serve as a significant mental well-being tool, aligning with and challenging existing theoretical frameworks.

5.3 Societal implications

This research not only confirms existing perspectives on the positive impacts of gaming on mental well-being but also introduces new detailed evidence on how cozy games specifically provide mental support. By exploring the firsthand experience of individuals who use cozy games as a coping mechanism, this study offers nuanced understanding of how these games contribute to mental well-being.

This study demonstrates that cozy games can be used as a unique medium for enhancing mental well-being as a coping mechanism. The findings provide evidence that individuals can balance gaming with daily life responsibilities that can help them tackle obstacle with a more positive mental state. Through various management strategies such as time restraints or using gaming as a reward after completing work, this research identified how exactly individuals can and are balancing gaming with daily life. Whereby this research contributes a nuanced understanding of how cozy games can be integrated into daily life's as a beneficial mental health resource, expanding upon the notion of Galanis et al. (2021, p. 1) of gaming not being addictive, and Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, pp. 2-3) perspective that when gaming is approached mindfully it can unveil significant benefits for mental well-being.

Furthermore, participants within this study emerged with a more positive psychological mindset, experiencing both short-term benefits and long-term benefits. These benefits support Schijven and Kikkawa (2024, pp. 2-3) as well as Chan et al. (2022, p. 127) goal to promote gaming as therapeutic tool among health-care practitioners. This research highlights how cozy games, when used mindfully, can be integrated into healthcare strategies to maximize therapeutic benefits. Thereby, this research endorses the inclusion of gaming in healthcare strategies, specifically cozy game from a mindful perspective to maximize therapeutic benefits and help individuals enhance their mental well-being as a supplementary medical aid, not as the sole solution.

These insights are invaluable contributions for game developers and healthcare practitioners alike, offering a new perspective on the potential of gaming in mental well-being. By providing evidence that can shift the narrative around gaming towards a more positive lights, this study encourages engagement with cozy games, showcasing their

potential to support mental well-being. This research paves the way for a broader acceptance of gaming as a valuable tool for enhancing mental well-being, emphasizing the importance of mindful and balanced gaming practices for society.

5.4 Limitations

The primary limitation of this research is the small sample size of eleven interviews, which only represents a fraction of the cozy gamer population. Additionally, the study focused solely on students and young professionals within the age bracket of 18 to 34 years old, limiting the diversity of perspective from gamers with different occupational backgrounds and ages. While qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, this limitation serves as a starting point that can guide future research with larger samples (Brennen, 2017, pp. 14-15).

Moreover, despite efforts to apply reflexivity and minimize personal biases during data collection and analysis, complete objectivity in qualitative research is challenging (O'Connor, 2011, para 2-4). Consequently, the researchers' personal views and beliefs may have indirectly influenced the interpretation of the data.

5.5 Recommendations

This study has explored gamers experience with cozy game to manage their mental well-being, along with topics including coping mechanism, gratifications, media dependency, escapism, and more. Each of these areas was examined briefly, highlighting the need for further research to gain a deeper understanding within each topic in relation to cozy games. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies focus individually on each of these topics to gain deeper understanding.

Additionally, this research found that cozy games can help individuals move from a negative psychological state to a more positive psychological state. However, this conclusion is based on participants self-reported experience. To enhance the credibility and robustness of these findings, it would be valuable to conduct experiments to confirm these claims.

Furthermore, the most significant limitation of this study is the small sample size of eleven interviews, which is not representative of the entire population of cozy gamers. Future research should involve a larger sample size for better representation.

By addressing these recommendations, future research will fill the existing research gap and contribute to one of the most dynamic sectors. This will help understand the

therapeutic potential of cozy games that provide a sanctuary-like experience that shields and heals players from pressures, immersing them in tranquility within a nurturing environment that helps them cope with life stressors and emerge with a more positive mental state.

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Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for being present today. My name is Naomi Alcocer, and I am currently studying Media & Creative Industries at Erasmus University. To finish my masters, I wanted to research gamers' experience with cozy games as coping tool to manage their mental well-being. To do this I am going to ask you questions relating to your own personal experience. Once again this is purely voluntary and are not required to answer all questions.

Cozy Games

Defining
- What makes a game 'cozy' for you?
  - o **Follow-up:** why?

Abundance
- How do you usually find resources like food and crafting materials in cozy games?
- Was there a moment when you found or got more recourse than you expected?
  - o **Follow-up**: how did that make you feel? why?

Safety
- Can you describe a moment in a cozy game where you felt completely at ease or worry-free?
  - o **Follow-up:** Is this for small moments in the game or throughout? what about them helps you feel this way?
- What is your experience with challenges or pressures in cozy games?
  - o **Probe:** time limit, enemies, doing things perfect etc.
  - o **Follow-up:** how does the absence of these challenges or pressure affect your gaming experience?

Softness
- How do the art style and design of cozy games make you feel?
  - o **Probe:** relaxed, comfortable, anxious, happy, etc.
  - o **Follow-up:** why do you think that is?
- What visual or sound elements in cozy games do you find comforting or soothing?

Narratives
- What would you say is the takeaway or message from the cozy game you play?
  - o **Probe:** starting a farm, first responsibility, journey, dealing with death, etc.

Gratifications

Motivation & Demotivation
- What draws you to play cozy games?
  - o **Follow-up:** what specific things do you look forward to?
- At what times or situations do you find yourself reaching for a cozy game?
  - o **Probe:** After work, school, discussion, etc.
    - ▪ **Follow-up:** What makes these times/situations ideal for cozy gaming?
- Have you ever been turned off by something in a cozy game that made you stop playing?
  - o **Follow-up:** Can you tell me what made you stop playing? Or why did it make you stop playing?

Gratification sought & obtained
- What were your expectations from cozy games before playing?
- Was there a specific kind of enjoyment or relief you were seeking from cozy games instead of other types of games?
- What kind of satisfaction would you say you received after playing cozy games?

Higher-order needs & Meaningful play
- Has a cozy game ever let you try something new, like a hobby or skills you wouldn't do in real-life?
    - **Probe:** such as starting a new farm, going fishing, harvesting, building, etc.
    - **Follow-up:** What did you learn from that experience? How did that make you feel?
- Do you view cozy games more as tool for personal growth or as a source of entertainment?
    - **Follow-up:** why?
- Have cozy games ever given you a sense of achievement different from your everyday life?

Coping Mechanism

Coping levels
- Do you find yourself turning to cozy games during tough times?
    - **Follow-up:** what prompts that choice? What specifically about cozy games helps you during those times?
- Is playing cozy games during stress or tough times something you do consciously, or does it happen spontaneously?
    - **Follow-up:** Could you share more about what drives that choice? Or habit?
- Was it more a distraction, or did it help you address what was bothering you?

Effectiveness
- How do cozy games compare to other stress relief methods you've tried?
- Would you recommend someone to use cozy games when they are feeling stressed?
    - **Follow-up**: why? What makes you think this would help them?
- How do cozy games help you detach yourself from real-world concerns?

Mental Well-being

Psychological state phases
- Can you describe how you generally feel before starting a cozy game?
    - **Probe:** your mood, thoughts, etc.
- Can you describe how you feel during playing cozy games?
    - **Follow-up:** how does your mood or feeling change?
- Can you describe how you feel after you finished playing cozy games?
    - **Probe:** Is there a noticeable difference in your mood or state of mind?

Cozy game contributions
- Have there been moments within cozy games that brought you genuine happiness or calm?
    - **Follow-up:** what was it specifically about the cozy game that made you feel this?
    - **Probe:** building friendships, crafting, learning new skills, etc.
- How do cozy games help you foster a more positive state of mind?

Mindfulness
- How do you balance gaming with other parts of your life to ensure it remains a positive influence on your mental state?
  - o **Probe:** prioritizing, having designated time, etc.

Media Dependency

Differentiating dependency types
- Do you play cozy games with specific goals in mind like relaxing, or is it more about getting lost in the cozy game?
- Have you ever felt an urge to play a cozy game when you had other responsibilities?
  - o **Follow-up:** how do you usually handle this?

Dependency self-assessment
- Looking back, how has your relationship with cozy games changed over time?
  - o **Probe:** has it become more consistent? Less?
  - o **Follow-up**: why?
- How important is the role of cozy games for your overall mental well-being?

END

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with cozy games, as a tool for mental well-being?

Appendix B

Participant overview

Interviewee	Participant	Age	Location	Occupation	Cozy Game	Time
1	LC	25	China	Academia	Animal Crossing	60 min
2	SJ	25	The Netherlands	Academia	Animal Crossing	52 min
3	MB	25	The Netherlands	Young professional	Little Gator Game	50 min
4	AA	21	The Netherlands	Academia	SIMS	67 min
5	AD	25	Sweden	Young professional	Minecraft	46 min
6	AS	24	Portugal	Academia	SIMS	45 min
7	BS	28	Germany	Young professional	Animal Crossing	60 min
8	LT	26	The Netherlands	Academia	Stardew Valley	45 min
9	NE	28	England	Young professional	Stardew Valley	50 min
10	DT	18	The Netherlands	Academia	Stardew Valley	49 min
11	RC	25	China	Academia	Animal Crossing	47 min

Note. Cozy game developers are as follows: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020), *Little Gator Game* (MegaWobble, 2022), *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), and *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011). Full references are provided in the reference list.

Appendix C

Informed Consent

CONSENT REQUEST FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in qualitative research about cozy games in relation to mental well-being. The purpose of this study is to understand how gamers ages 18 to 34 experience their use of cozy games as coping mechanism to manage their mental well-being. By agreeing to participate in this research you agree to be interviewed, recorded, as well as to the following:

RISK & BENEFITS

A. For the protection of privacy, every participant can remain anonymous.
B. Audio recordings will be made during the interviews but will be kept private and used only for analysis purposes.
C. If the participants would like to see the outcomes of this study, the participants need to communicate this to the interviewer.

LOCATION AND TIME

The interview will last between 45 to 60 minutes and will take place at a location that is most convenient to the participant. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

COMPENSATION

There is no monetary compensation for participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHT

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer specific questions. Your identity can be made anonymous or be known in this research when consenting.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact the supervisor of this research: Argyrios Emmanouloudis, emmanouloudis@eshcc.eur.nl, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam. For further information regarding this research contact the primary investigator: Naomi Alcocer, 515892na@eur.nl, +31614490485.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. To minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name   Signature   Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name   Signature   Date

Coding Tree

Table D1

Theme 1: The Pursuit of Cozyness: Fulfilments & Rewards in Comforting Experiences

Initial code	Category	Sub-theme	Theme
Relaxation Effortless Aesthetic	Gratification sought	Fulfilment	The Pursuit of Cozyness: Fulfilments & Drivers in Comforting Experiences
Light Happiness Autonomy Socialization Accomplishment	Gratification obtained		
Self-actualization Gentle challenge Unlimited Loss	Higher-level drivers	Drivers	
Physiological needs Monotony Security Monetization Hard challenge	Lower-level drivers		
Worry-free Beginner friendly Repetitive Low consequences	Safety experiences	Cozy experiences	
Supplied Capitalism Experiment Unbounded	Abundance experiences		
Welcoming Familiar Positive Innocent Under stimulating	Softness Experiences		

Table D2

Theme 2: Meaningful Journey: Coping & Crafting Well-Being in Cozy Realms

Initial code	Category	Sub-theme	Theme
Positive state traits Negative state traits State fostering	Psychological dynamics	Mental well-being	Meaningful Journey: Coping & Crafting Well-Being in Cozy Realms
Mental state before Mental state during Mental state after	Psychological phases		
Short-term outcomes Long-term outcomes	Psychological Effect		
Triggers Intentionality	Usage patterns	Coping through play	
Functionality Applicability Comparability	Effectiveness		
Explicit message Subtle message Environmental safety	Nurturance	Meaningful play	
Seldom practice Reality elements	Educational		
Reflection Self-Discovery	Growth		

Table D3

Theme 3: Navigating Dependency: Retreating & Re-Entering Islands Cozy Escapes

Initial code	Category	Sub-theme	Theme
Immersive graphics Immersive music	Fostering escapism	Escapism realm	Navigating Dependency: Retreating & Re-Entering Cozy Escapes
Ownership Autonomy	Creative agency		
Dreams Possibilities	Aspirational play		
Psychological traits Goal-driven traits Responsibilities	Reliance level	Dependency dynamics	
Consistency Increasing Decreasing	Evolution		
Alternative Valuable	Point of view	Dependency awareness & regulation	
Time restrains Protection Reward Priorities	Management Strategy		