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Cozy Heterotopias in JRPGs: A Foucauldian Perspective on the Spatiality of Coziness in Japanese Role-Playing Games

Abstract

This article applies the concept of heterotopia as developed by Michel Foucault to cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. After introducing the concept of heterotopia and its six key principles, the term *JRPG* is briefly reflected upon. We then analyze key aspects of the games *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* regarding the significance of heterotopias for their sense of coziness. We conclude that Foucault's concept of heterotopia helps in understanding the way in which coziness, on the one hand, offers a respite from the crises of life while, on the other hand, enabling an engagement with said crises in a safe environment.

Keywords: cozy games, heterotopia, Japanese role-playing games, game studies

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Introduction

In this article, we analyze how coziness, at least in a selection of prominent Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), can be interpreted as heterotopias in the sense of Michel Foucault, i.e., ‘other places’ that provide an escape from, but also an opportunity to engage with, crises. Coziness in video games has risen in prominence as a subject within game studies in correlation with the popularity of so-called *cozy games*. Short et al. (2018) identify three crucial tenets of coziness in video games: safety, abundance, and softness. Cozy games deviate from the prominence of combat and survival and instead focus on higher-level needs, such as mastery, self-reflection, and connectedness (Short et al., 2018). Bellingham (2022) aptly describes cozy games as follows:

While there isn’t an official definition for what a cozy game is exactly, those that do fall under this categorization have a particular vibe that is easy to spot. Typically, a cozy game will be laid back, have minimal, if any, combat, an endearing art style, and will wrap its action around a wholesome story (paragraph 2).

Waszkiewicz & Bakun (2020, p. 233) further disambiguate between three types of cozy aesthetics: coherent cozy aesthetics that present coziness as consistent with the game’s narrative and gameplay, dissonant cozy aesthetics that present a contrast between the game’s narrative on the one hand and the gameplay on the other (often to make a specific point about contentious themes), and situational cozy aesthetics that occur in individual sections of a game. The latter is especially important since the examples discussed in this article are not cozy games in the strict sense of the term, i.e., they do feature elements of combat and survival.

First, however, we wish to illustrate the concept of heterotopia from a Foucauldian perspective and highlight how it is connected to cozy aesthetics in video games. Then, we provide a brief elaboration on, and critical reflection of, the term *Japanese role-playing games*. Finally, we apply the theoretical considerations to two example sequences from well-renowned JRPGs, namely: *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (Level-5, 2011) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix, 2020). Combining a close reading of specific elements of these games, we conclude that both examples integrate, though in different ways, heterotopian functions with cozy aesthetics.

The concept of heterotopia and its applicability to video games

The term *heterotopia* is a compound of *other* (*hetero*) and *places* (*topoi*). According to Foucault (1986), such ‘counter-places’ can be found in every culture and civilization. These places stand in contrast to what is considered common or

permissible. For example, while nudity is relatively restricted in public spaces, it is quite the opposite in a sauna. Such heterotopias essentially compensate for otherwise rigid regulations by creating a space to disengage from them – at least temporarily. In this article, we concentrate on heterotopias of crisis, i.e., “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (Foucault, 1986, p. 4). We claim that video games can fulfill a heterotopian function and that cozy aesthetics especially hold the potential to not only provide a retreat from the macro- and microsocial crises, but also a space to process them.

Foucault’s original conceptualization of heterotopias comes with six key principles that inform the analysis of cozy aesthetics below. Not all these principles have to apply for a space to be considered a heterotopia, but they aid in understanding the functions of heterotopias within societies as well as within video games. They are illustrated here regarding their connection to the latter.

The first principle states that heterotopias are a constant in human societies. According to Foucault (1986), “there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias” (p. 4). While this might be a generalization that warrants further scrutiny, it is mirrored by the omnipresence of games across cultures, which can be interpreted as a particular form of heterotopia. While we focus on heterotopia in video games, other branches of spatial discourse within game studies do consider the interpretation of games themselves as heterotopia, for example in Aarseth and Günzel (2019).

The second principle is that heterotopias take on a specific societal function. They provide exemption from certain rules, offer space for reflection, and enable an engagement with crises. This certainly reflects in the engagement with cozy games to which Short et al. (2018) ascribe a clear function as well: “Cozy games give players space to deal with emotional and social maintenance and growth” (section 1).

The third principle is the multiplication of spaces. According to Foucault (1986), heterotopias juxtapose “several spaces, which are in themselves incompatible” (p. 6). Foucault illustrates this with the example of a theater in which several places are found one after the other in the same place, i.e., the theater stage hosts a variety of fictional places. A similar multiplication of spaces can be identified in video games, for example in the exploration of fantastical worlds in the *Super Mario* series (Nintendo, 1985–).

The fourth principle pertains to the significance of time in heterotopias. For this, Foucault (1986) employs the term *heterochrony*, which indicates that heterotopias contrast the temporality of society. Cozy games as heterotopias are consequently demarcated by their abundance of time in contrast to daily life. Further, cozy games tend to evoke “a feeling of nostalgia” (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 227),

deliberately removing themselves from the inevitable linearity of technological progress.¹

The fifth principle is that heterotopias are characterized by a system of “opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault, 1986, p. 7). Heterotopias are not public spaces per se. They are separated by a border that can be crossed through a designated entrance, whether such an entrance is physical or a ritualistic process. Games feature such clear openings and closings if one subscribes to the idea of Johan Huizinga’s (1938/1980) magic circle, which delineates the spatial as well as temporal beginning and ending of a game.

The sixth principle is that heterotopias enable a critical reflection upon the world that exists outside of them. Heterotopias can create an illusion which reveals that all other spaces are equally illusory, or they can create an alternative, orderly space compared to the disorder at other spaces (Foucault, 1986, p. 8). Cozy aesthetics similarly provide a playful space that enables a critical reflection upon the persisting need for productivity in daily life.

These six principles guide the understanding of heterotopias that we wish to apply for the analysis of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. It is important to mention that the application of the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia to video games has also been discussed critically in recent years. Sara McNamee (2020) and Maurício Liesen (2008) present two attempts of applying the concept of heterotopia to video games. Aarseth and Günzel (2019) further introduce the term ‘ludotopia’ – a perspective indicative of the spatial turn in game studies at large. However, Stephan Günzel (2020) also warns against an inflationary use of the term *heterotopia*, since it would diminish the analytical value of the concept (p. 166). Harald Koberg (2021) also criticizes that the question of whether games can be considered heterotopias is of little value (p. 116). While acknowledging these critical perspectives, we argue that there is value in analyzing how cozy aesthetics intersect with heterotopias. There are notable parallels between their characteristics and viewing cozy aesthetics as heterotopias may enhance our understanding of coziness in video games beyond escapism, allowing for critical reflection on personal and societal crises.

JRPG as a contested term

While we employ the term JRPG in this article, it is important to acknowledge that the term comes with some complications. The abbreviation stands for *Japanese role-playing games*, suggesting games that are developed in Japan, made by Japanese developers, or have some distinct features that render them quintessentially *Japanese*. That this assumption is inaccurate at best has already been pointed out by Wada (2017, p. 142), who traces the history of JRPGs back to Western tabletop

¹ For a discussion of the concept of heterochrony in video games see Tobias Unterhuber (2022).

games. Within the limitations of this article, we cannot explore the intricacies of genre discourse in depth (see Feige [2015] for an elaborate discussion of video game genres and Roth et al. [2021] for a recent engagement with Japanese media culture), but we do wish to point out some crucial tenets of the debate.

Mattias Van Ommen (2018) points out that “a majority of people do use the terms JRPG and WRPG (Western Role-Playing Game) as constituting different video game genres rather than denoting geographical origin alone” (p. 9). Douglas Schules (2015) highlights that it is indeed peculiar that JRPGs receive their own abbreviation whereas titles from other countries, such as *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007), do not, even though they also draw from national history and folklore (p. 6). Similarly, Mattias Van Ommen (2018) assumes that the differentiation between JRPGs and WRPGs may well be due to the conceptual reinforcement of cultural differences and orientalism (p. 10). What is more, players commonly associate JRPGs with a fully refined protagonist and fantastical designs, whereas WRPGs are more commonly associated with a blank slate character and realism (Van Ommen, 2018, p. 9).

The predominant assessment within video game studies is that the idiosyncrasies of JRPGs are to be found within the broader historical, cultural, and economic context in which Japanese games have developed. This entails the culture of media mix, i.e., “the practice of marketing interconnected works for different media (manga, anime, movies, etc.) and tie-in products, generally through the promotion of attractive characters (*kyara*²) and an engaging fictional world (*sekai*)” (Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2015, p. 4). The concept of media mix shares some similarities with Henry Jenkins’ (2008) notion of transmedia storytelling, but rather than hinging on the story, media mix relies on characters that “appear in different stories and settings that do not necessarily have to make any coherent or continuous sense” (Blom, 2021, p. 5). Further, “Japanese video games, or *geemu*, are not linked to an ‘essence’ of any kinds (national, mediatic, etc.), but to a market, or rather to – admittedly unstable and fluctuating – markets” (Picard, 2013, p. 2). The Japanese market is one that Picard refers to as ‘glocal’ since it emerged in the context of strong international collaborations, but also several peculiarities of the local market.

Notably, the term *JRPG* has come to be criticized by Japanese game developers. This was most vividly illustrated when Naoki Yoshida, producer of *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix, 2010) and *Final Fantasy XVI* (Square Enix, 2023), argued that the separation between Western and Japanese RPGs was not only arbitrary but belittling to Japanese developers since it effectively assigned RPGs developed in Japan to a separate category of video games, which would not directly compete

² *Kyara* is used in contrast to *kyaraktā*. *Kyara* indicates “a visual icon without a story” that can effortlessly appear in other forms of media whereas *kyaraktā* indicates a “dramatis persona that develops as a person in a story” (Blom, 2021, p. 4).

with Western counterparts (Skill Up, 2023, TC 28:24–30:15). Accordingly, the term *JRPG* is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it establishes a distinction that is at best unwarranted and at worst exclusive. On the other hand, it does emphasize the specifics of a highly influential market within the domain of video games, enabling scholars and critics alike to analyze the permeations of the letter *J* in *JRPG*. The term is thus implemented in this article with the aforementioned complication in mind: as an ill-defined ascription that draws an unfavorable distinction while still providing the opportunity to engage with the evident specificity of Japanese media culture.

Analyses

The following sections present an application of the above-illustrated concept of heterotopias in conjunction with the notion of coziness. As will be illustrated here briefly, the two examples, *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch*³ and *Final Fantasy VII Remake*,⁴ were selected since they both have an established standing amongst JRPGs, are integrated into the media mix of Japanese culture, and were released with Western audiences in mind.

Ni no Kuni was initially released for the Nintendo DS in 2010, adapted as *Wrath of the White Witch* in 2011 for PlayStation 3, and brought to Western markets in 2013. *Ni no Kuni* has sold an estimate of 1.5 million copies worldwide by 2019⁵ and spawned several sequels as well as a tie-in feature film. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is a contemporary interpretation of the 1997 classic *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997), which contributed to the popularity of JRPGs not only in the broadly understood West but in Japan as well (Roth et al., 2021, p. 24). By September 2023, the remake has sold over 7 million copies worldwide on all platforms (Khayl, 2023). It has spawned a series of tie-in games on various platforms as well as a feature film. The analyzed games have been played to completion and were subjected to close playing as proposed by Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum (2011).

Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

The notion of Foucauldian heterotopias is already conceptually imbued in the narrative of *Ni no Kuni*. The original Japanese title, 二ノ国, translates to ‘second world’. This second world is where the protagonist, a young boy named Oliver,

³ Other noteworthy contributions to the analysis of *Ni no Kuni* include Denison (2023) and Sapach (2017).

⁴ Other noteworthy contributions to the analysis of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* include Brown (2023) and Mc Glynn (2023).

⁵ Sales data according to vgchartz.com (n.d.).

travels after the tragic death of his mother. Confronted with a crisis of grief and regret, Oliver wishes to make things right. The second world becomes his second chance at preventing a tragedy as the evil wizard Shadar threatens to plunge the world into darkness.

On the most general level, the second world of *Ni no Kuni* functions as a cozy heterotopia in several ways. First, it provides Oliver with the opportunity to escape to an alternative universe in which he encounters magical creatures, forms social bonds, and gradually learns to wield the power of magic. In Motorville, his small 1960s-inspired hometown, Oliver feels lonely and powerless, whereas the second, new world operates as a cozy retreat in which he can safely process the tragedy that befell his family.

The world he travels to is demarcated by a ritual of opening and closing. Upon first entering the second world, Oliver casts a spell called 'Gateway', which is illustrated as a majestic gate through which he travels in a cutscene. This ritual of spell casting simultaneously indicates the separation and interconnectedness of both worlds in the very sense of a Foucauldian heterotopia, including the principle of opening and closing. The latter is especially important in the context of coziness since Oliver can henceforth travel between worlds at his own discretion. What was previously a persistent and inevitable confrontation with the emptiness of his mother being gone, is now mediated by the option to find respite and a sense of belonging in the second world. This heterotopia enables him to process, or leastwise work on, the crisis of grief in a Foucauldian sense.

This very form of escapism could metaphorically mirror the urge of the player to find a soothing haven of safety among the turmoil of daily life. While such a notion largely depends on the individual player and their life situation, *Ni no Kuni* offers the same form of cozy heterotopia to players that it offers to its protagonist. In this way, the close cooperation between the developer studio *Level-5* and *Studio Ghibli* shines through. The integration of renowned *Studio Ghibli* productions, including the wonders of *other worlds*, is a key reason why *Ni no Kuni* can be considered a "hybridization" between video game and feature-film animation (Navarro Remesal, 2013, p. 77).

With the second world under threat, Oliver discovers that he can do good and make a lasting impact on the second world as well as his own. For example, Oliver meets a girl named Esther who appears in an entirely apathetic state. By traveling back to Motorville and finding the girl she is connected to, Oliver manages to not only restore the spirits of Esther but also rekindle the bond of mutual support among a family that lives just down the road in Motorville. Thus, the crucial need that is addressed is a high-level one, that of connectedness, which Short et al. (2018) describe as particularly prevalent in cozy games. This small example of a much broader narrative also illustrates the profound belief in positivity and hopefulness

that fuels cozy aesthetics. As Colin Campbell (2022) states: “The essential nature of cozy gaming is that of helping other people through non-violent means, often by nurture and generosity” (paragraph 3).

However, one element of *Ni no Kuni* appears to be in contradiction with coziness: to progress, players must fight a plethora of real-time battles against an array of monsters. Short et al. (2018) argue that the occurrence of an immediate threat to life may disrupt an established sense of coziness. Though this may be the case, *Ni no Kuni* makes a concerted effort to maintain a cozy heterotopia, even in the face of adversity. Such a seeming contradiction is achieved by reducing the degree to which the threat is threatening. To illustrate this, a close inspection of one combat encounter may be apt. Upon arriving in the fantastical village of Ding Dong Dell, Oliver learns that the town is infested by mice. To assist the regional king, Oliver traverses through the sewers and encounters the ruler of mice (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Hickory Dock exemplifies how cozy aesthetics can translate to a combat encounter at the finale of the sewer dungeon in *Ni no Kuni*.

Own screenshot.

While players can die in the fight and are reset only by giving up a fraction of their gold, the oversized mouse does not appear very intimidating. It is, most notably, an anthropomorphized animal. Anthropomorphic animals are, as Campbell (2022) points out, a frequent occurrence to elicit coziness. Further, as can be seen in an insert at the beginning of the encounter, the enemy’s name is Hickory Dock, King Hickory XVII (jp. チューベル). In both languages, the name is associated with a sense of cuteness or nostalgia, the latter of which Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) tie directly to cozy games. The English name Hickory Dock is a reference to the eponymous nursery rhyme, starting with the lines: “Hickory, dickory, dock;

the mouse ran up the clock.” The Japanese name, Romanized as ‘chuuberu’, is an onomatopoeia that references the squealing of mice. Thus, the name of the enemy reduces the threat of the encounter by drawing from nostalgia and cuteness.

One further aspect in which *Ni no Kuni* ostensibly establishes itself as a cozy heterotopia is in its presentation of food (Virgen Castro et al., 2018; Waszkiewicz, 2022). Short et al. (2018) as well as Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) stress the significance of food for coziness. For example, as Oliver enters the desert town of Al Mamoon, his trusted companion, Mr. Drippy, points out the local culinary specialty – babanas that look exactly like bananas and, according to the item description, “have a rich, sweet taste that makes them perennially popular” (*Ni no Kuni*). Further, one of the key mechanics of *Ni no Kuni* is to gather familiars – i.e., the monsters one encounters in the wild – and gradually level them up. To do so, one must feed the familiars. As can be seen in Figure 2, the items used as food feature a range of pastries and parfaits, all of which are designed in detail and feature appetizing item descriptions. Thus, *Ni no Kuni* presents food as delicious and abundant.



Figure 2. To permanently strengthen familiars in *Ni no Kuni*, players feed them a variety of detailed treats. Own screenshot.

While further aspects could be considered for analysis here, those mentioned in this article provide a sufficient illustration of how *Ni no Kuni* establishes its function as a cozy heterotopia. The conceptual framework of the narrative establishes a crisis of grief. The diegetic second world enables the protagonist

an escape that, over the course of the game, allows him to process the loss of his mother. He also finds opportunities for agency that he would otherwise feel devoid of. Alongside purpose and companionship, the second world is rich in culinary treats. Potentially disruptive elements such as combat encounters are largely imbued with cozy aesthetics that render them less threatening while maintaining a ludic challenge that provides ample opportunity for player engagement.

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Final Fantasy VII Remake (FF VII-R) mixes elements of the original *Final Fantasy VII* with added story beats and meta-narrative experimentation. The story of FF VII-R is set on the fictional planet Gaia, mainly within the city of Midgard. It portrays a dystopian tech-centered future in which the mega corporation Shinra is harvesting Mako, the life energy of the planet. The protagonist and ex-soldier Cloud Strife works as a mercenary for the eco-terrorist group Avalanche. The group attacks Shinra's Mako reactors to try and prevent them from killing the planet.

FF VII-R features semi-real time combat, addresses serious subjects such as traumatic experiences, and operates in a rather serious tone. The narrative focus is on an environmental catastrophe, which can be read as critical commentary on our environmental crisis, which has only become more urgent since the original *Final Fantasy VII* was released (IPCC, 2021). Addressing these topics does not seem very cozy, and FF VII-R is not as such a cozy game, but it does feature situational cozy aesthetics that warrant exploration (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 233). We want to highlight this point by focusing on a specific sequence between Tifa and Cloud: the water tower sequence, which gives the player a moment of respite between more challenging parts of the game.

The water tower sequence reveals essential backstory and showcases the emotional connection between Cloud and Tifa. It features an intimate conversation between the characters in their teenage years, as they discuss their future and relationship. The sequence demarcates a significant point of character development for Cloud, as he realizes he must fulfill his promise to help Tifa. The subsequent analepsis shows Tifa and Cloud in their teenage years sitting atop the water tower (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Tifa and Cloud sitting at the water tower, contemplating their future. *FF VII-R*. Own screenshot.

In an intimate conversation the two characters ponder their future and their relationship. Cloud tells Tifa that he has decided to leave town to become a soldier. Tifa wants him to promise that he will save her if she is “ever trapped or in trouble [...]” (*FF VII-R*). Cloud agrees and the analepsis jumps to a more recent sequence in Tifa’s bar. Tifa tells Cloud that she “feels trapped” (*FF VII-R*). Back in the present, Cloud realizes that he must fulfill his promise and help Tifa. The sequence thus demarcates a crucial point of character development for Cloud.

Several factors contribute to the coziness of this sequence. Absent from combat, it creates a warm midsummer night atmosphere. The intact wooden village of Nibelheim contrasts the flames seen in other flashbacks, as well as the predominantly steel city of Midgard. The musical score complements the ambiance with its light yet melancholic tone. The camera captures the starry sky, inviting players to share the perspective of Cloud and Tifa, looking at the stars above and the village below. The water tower sequence has become iconic for the character-driven narrative of *Final Fantasy VII* and invokes nostalgic recollections for players familiar with the original game (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020; Figure 4). Also, it can refresh the parasocial relationship between the players and the fictional characters of Tifa and Cloud, which adds an additional layer of nostalgia and coziness (Bloom, 2023).

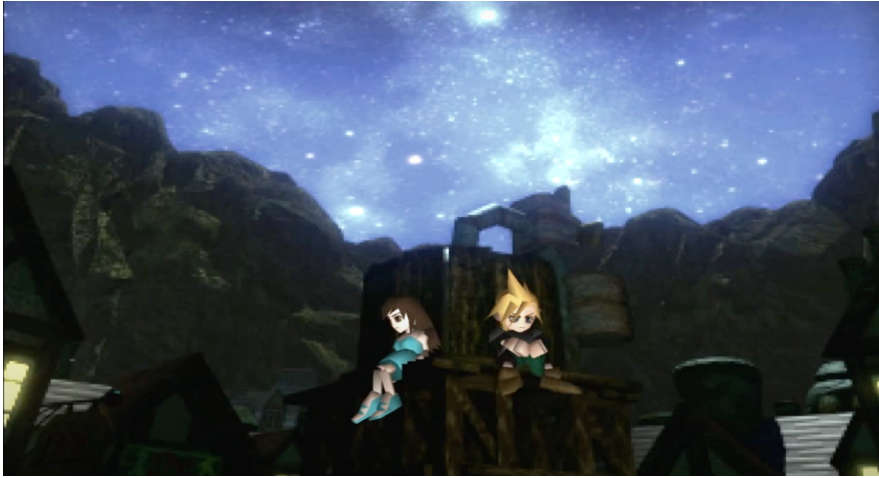


Figure 4. The water tower sequence already became iconic in the original *Final Fantasy VII*, imbued with the same cozy atmosphere.
Own screenshot.

In terms of the Foucauldian conceptualization of heterotopia, the water tower sequence can be described as a crisis heterotopia – the crisis of adolescence. The water tower provides a space in which water is stored and stands still, rather than being used and in flux. It is a space that ordinarily cannot be accessed by the general public. In *FF VII-R* it becomes a place that children and adolescents appropriate as their own, far removed from the world of adults (Unterhuber, 2022). The water tower allows for private conversations hidden from the eyes and ears of others. Thus, it is a place where one can feel safe and see everything above as well as below. For Cloud, the recollection of this place and the conversation with Tifa functions as an initial spark for a change of heart, because after the sequence he acts more open towards Tifa.

The memory of the water tower also fulfills another function in the context of heterotopia. It is a place that exists only in memory since Nibelheim has been burned to the ground. The physical space can thus not be accessed anymore. In the larger crisis of the exploitation of the planet, the recollection of the water tower stands in contrast to the dystopian domain of Midgard and its large constructions of steel. Especially due to the imminent collapse of the planet's ecosystem, the water tower, amongst the wooden houses of Nibelheim, indicates a harmonic co-existence with nature.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed how Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias can contribute to the understanding of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. We interpreted select aspects of *Ni no Kuni* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* against the backdrop of heterotopias. We found that in both cases key aspects that contribute to the games' cozy aesthetics are reflected in the concept of heterotopia. These include the rituals of opening and closing, the juxtaposition of time, the multiplication of spaces, and the heterotopia's function of seeking respite from, but also engaging with, crises. In conclusion, we argue that Foucault's concept of heterotopias can aid in the understanding of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs and that its application supports a differentiated analytical approach to coziness in video games.

As a limitation of our analysis, we wish to highlight that only two video games have been considered here. We do not claim that all JRPGs feature cozy aesthetics nor that cozy aesthetics are a defining trait of JRPGs at large. Rather than making a generalized statement about the genre, if it can be referred to as such, we argue that Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia complements the understanding of cozy aesthetics in JRPGs. For further research, it appears promising to draw from more examples to test whether similar findings can be made in the application of heterotopias as a concept to other games that can be considered cozy. There is still much work to be done in the domain of coziness in video games. It may well be worthwhile to consider other conceptual frameworks to analyze the significance of coziness in video games. Lastly, it might even be a possibility to integrate the concept of heterotopia within the spatial discourse revolving around video games, potentially with the prospect to delineate what might be referred to as *heteroludotopia*.

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