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Idle Games: A Cozy Genre Turned Exploitative

Abstract

This paper explores the connection between cozy games and idle games, analyzing shared elements and underlying principles. Cozy games are characterized by an emphasis on comfort, relaxation, and safety, offering players an escape from the pressure of daily life through soothing gameplay experiences. Meanwhile, idle games feature waiting as a core mechanic, allowing progress to be made even in the player's absence. This provides a continuous sense of growth and progression throughout the player's day but may also lead to frequent engagements to optimize production. Furthermore, this desire for continuous progress may also be exploited by developers who capitalize on player impatience by incorporating microtransactions that expedite progression in exchange for real-world money. Thus, while idle games can fit within the cozy game genre, their monetization practices raise questions about ethical responsibility on the part of game developers and taint the genre's potential as a serene gaming experience.

Keywords: cozy, casual, idle, exploitation, microtransaction, optimization

Introduction

While the mention of video games typically conjures up images of exhilarating gameplay, wherein players strive to overcome physical challenges and obstacles, there is a growing interest in games that emphasize comfort, relaxation, and

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a profound sense of serenity. These games, known as cozy games or wholesome games, have emerged as a distinct genre that offers their players an escape from the pressures of daily life. Unlike their fast-paced counterparts, cozy games foster a state of tranquility through activities such as soothing puzzles and farming simulations.

Meanwhile, idle games, a subgenre within the realm of casual games, are characterized by a core mechanic of waiting, wherein progress continues to accumulate both with and without the player's presence, creating a consistent sense of growth and progression. Furthermore, while it may seem contradictory to refer to waiting as a mechanic when it is, in essence, a lack of interactions, idle games adeptly subvert this expectation. The genre's ever-present nature and complex economies allow the absence of direct engagement to be transformed into a nuanced interplay involving the management of impatience and strategies for optimization.

Within instances of the idle game genre, in-game currency is constantly accumulated and may be spent on upgrades that accelerate this production of resources. Notably, the prompt acquisition of optimal-choice upgrades, as identified by Erik D. Demaine et al. (2020), once they become available will ensure that production is optimized, thereby fostering a compelling incentive for players to regularly and frequently engage with the game. However, determining what action would be most optimal at any given point in an idle game will often prove difficult for players due to the large number of variables to consider. Additionally, impatience may drive players to return or spend prematurely, leading to sub-optimal decisions being made (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018).

Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman, in their book *Rules of Play*, define mechanics as "the basic game actions or set of actions that players repeat over and over as they play" (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2002, p. 579). This definition traditionally implies a need for physical interaction, yet the boundaries of what constitutes an action in gaming are increasingly expanding. Sonia Fizek, in her book *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic* (2022), explores play through a computer medium, delving into scenarios where players are not in direct control of the technology, such as in e-sports viewership or playing idle games. This broader interpretation of player interaction is particularly pertinent in the context of idle games. Unlike many casual games that use timers to limit play, idle games distinctively transform the act of waiting into a core gameplay mechanic. This transformation turns waiting into a strategic gameplay loop, where players are engaged in a continuous process of determining the most opportune moment to re-engage with the game and effectively utilize their accumulated resources.

However, this dynamic is often complicated by the introduction of micro-transactions, which present players with the choice of continuing to progress at their current pace or expediting the process by spending real-world money. This option fundamentally alters the gameplay experience, allowing players to pay to bypass the core mechanic of waiting and thus subverting the intended experience of gradual progression, while also raising ethical considerations about to manipulation of player impatience.

The incorporation of microtransactions within idle games presents a complex challenge to the genre's intrinsic gameplay experience, necessitating a nuanced shift in perspective to develop a better understanding of both how this exploitation occurs and the potential of idle games in the absence of such practices. This reevaluation uncovers significant parallels between idle and cozy games, particularly in their gameplay dynamics and the emotional responses that they elicit from players. This paper endeavors to contextualize idle games within the cozy game genre, focusing on an in-depth analysis of their shared elements and underlying principles. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the inherent nature of these games that stimulate frequent interactions, driving players to engage often and continuously with the genre to expedite progress. Finally, it will critically examine how developers exploit engagement dynamics, using microtransactions as a tool to maintain player involvement and incentivize financial expenditures.

Idle games

It is often challenging, if not impossible, to definitively pinpoint the origin of a genre as a result of shifting definitions and a multiplicity of interpretations (Derrida, 1967), but Eric Fredricksen's *Progress Quest* (2002) is widely acknowledged as one of the earliest instances of an idle game (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018; Deterding, 2016). This web-based game parodied the incessant grinding prevalent in most role-playing games (RPGs) of the time as well as the use of bots to circumvent these tedious elements by automating all aspects of gameplay beyond initial character creation. Following this step, the game is fully automated with the player's character going on adventures and quests that the player is unable to affect in any way, leaving them with nothing to do but watch progress be made. However, despite the satirical intent of its creator, many players gravitated toward the game and regularly returned to check on their progress. Sonia Fizek (2018) has examined this phenomenon through the lens of interpassivity, a media studies concept, centered on a piece of art or technology acting on the user's behalf. Here she argues that the act of automation in idle games frees the player from the responsibility of playing, while still granting them a sense of accomplishment for what the game achieved without their input. By tossing aside all extraneous elements, the game produced a

concentrated experience of endless progression, effectively emulating the sensation of progress found when playing RPGs.

These similarities have persisted as the genre has continued to evolve, with Nick Yee (2016) identifying a strong correlation between players of idle games and players of core RPGs, a fact that he attributed to the ability of idle games to "cleanly isolate the power progression and accumulation mechanics from the typical trappings of AAA RPGs" (para. 16). Moreover, Yee identified completion and power as the primary motivators for idle game players, whereas excitement and fantasy held the least amount of sway over their engagement. This finding underscores the inclination of idle game players to gravitate towards RPGs for the satisfaction derived from continual progress rather than for the allure of action or narrative. Such a preference aligns logically with idle games as they are a genre in which waiting constitutes a fundamental gameplay mechanic.

In idle games, the player's engagement typically consists of waiting for in-game currency to accumulate, spending it, and subsequently restarting the waiting process (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018). A notable exemplification of this concept is Ian Bogost's (2010) satirical Facebook game *Cow Clicker*, wherein the primary player interaction consists of clicking on a digital cow once and then waiting six hours to click on it again.

Waiting, however, is not unique to idle games as it is a rather common element of many casual games that would not be considered idle. *Candy Crush* (King, 2012), for example, is a popular casual game that restricts the player to a limited number of play sessions before they must wait for a timer to finish counting down. Consequently, waiting assumes a core role in this game, albeit in a manner where the player must wait until they are once more allowed to play rather than playing through the act of waiting.

In contrast, idle games commonly incorporate verisimilitude within the waiting process, wherein in-game currency accumulates in a manner that aligns more naturally with a player's mental model than an arbitrary timer counting down (Howe, 2017). This engenders a heightened sense of realism in the player, a feeling further amplified by the pervasive (Montola et al., 2009) nature of idle games, wherein in-game currency continues to accumulate whether the game is turned on or not (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018).

Upon the player's return to the game after a prolonged absence, calculations are performed to approximate and award the player an amount of in-game currency roughly equivalent to what they would have earned had the game been left running during that interval. Moreover, players are often prompted to return to the game via notifications, alerting them that a currency milestone has been reached, a task has been completed, or that they have simply not returned to the game in a certain amount of time (Larrson, 2019). Consequently, it has been posited that idle games

possess the ability to permeate every moment of a player's existence, effectively gamifying the concept of time itself (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018).

Moreover, often as players advance in idle games, upgrades will become available that reduce the frequency with which they must interact to advance either by extending the periods during which players may disengage without a loss in production or by automating aspects that were previously reliant on player involvement. Consequently, players find themselves freed from the need to interact, potentially leading to a sensation of boredom. However, this is not a mundane form of boredom characterized by aimless diversions or entertainment, but rather, as elucidated by Scott Richmond (2015), a profound boredom. This profound boredom affords users the opportunity and incentive to engage in thoughtful reflection and contemplation on the subject matter. Within this context, players gain the freedom to critically scrutinize the game's thematic elements and formulate strategies for future progression (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018; Buday et al., 2012).

In this paper, idle games will be defined as a genre characterized by the continuous growth and progression of in-game systems, even in the player's absence. This design aspect engenders a sense of achievement and accomplishment in the player, while also motivating them to return frequently and regularly to the game in order to optimize production.

Are idle games cozy?

Tanya X. Short et al.'s (2018) report explores the cozy game genre with the intention of providing a more comprehensive definition and deeper insights, asserting that cozy games are characterized by three main elements: safety, abundance, and softness.

Safety, in the context of cozy games, pertains to the absence of threats, difficult challenges, or the risk of losing progress. This aspect is prominently featured in idle games, where the absence of a game-over condition is considered a fundamental pillar of the genre (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018). Unlike most single-player games, no entity or event threatens the player or their progress, granting them freedom to explore the world and its mechanics without fear (Buday et al., 2012). Suboptimal decisions may be made by the player, providing a less-than-ideal boost in production (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018), but there is little risk of a careless decision costing them significantly. Instead, almost any action performed by the player will lead to a boost in production and growth (Deterding, 2019; Keogh & Richardson, 2018; Perdomo, 2021), regardless of the level of thought or effort invested into the decisions being made, making idle games, much like cozy games, accessible and enjoyable to players of all skill levels.

Abundance here relates to Abraham Maslow's (1943) work on the hierarchy of needs, which argued that love, esteem, and self-actualization cannot be experienced or sought until basic needs such as hunger or thirst are satisfied. In the case of idle games, abundance is achieved through automation, a prevalent mechanic of the genre. Often as players progress, the game increasingly handles tasks that previously demanded their attention, affording them the opportunity to contemplate the game's underlying themes or focus on strategic planning, now that their basic needs are being met (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018).

Finally, softness encompasses the visual, auditory, and sensory aspects of games. Cozy games aim not to stress or overstimulate players. In this regard, most idle games are designed for multiple short play sessions per day throughout extended periods, often months or years. Consequently, the art style and music are intentionally ambient, drawing no more attention than the player wishes to devote to it (Alharthi, Alsaedi et al., 2018). They are non-intrusive, and so the player is unlikely to grow bored or annoyed with them regardless of how long they play. Similarly, the gameplay may also be considered soft as it typically lacks strict time limits and instead allows players to proceed at their own pace. In its most ideal form, this grants players a sense of freedom, allowing them to progress without needing to engage with the game continuously and actively, but this is seldom how idle games are designed to be played.

Notably, many of the more recent instances of idle games feature a push-and-pull mechanic, regulating the amount of progress that can be achieved both during and between play sessions (Sadprasid et al., 2022). One such example of this push-and-pull mechanic is found in *Cookie Clicker* (Orteil, 2013). In this game, cookies are generated both by the player manually clicking on a giant cookie on the left-hand side of the screen and automatically by the game at set intervals. These cookies may then be spent on upgrades that increase the rate at which cookies are produced, but once the player has spent all their cookies, they must wait for more to spawn before their next purchase. As such, they are pushed from the game as no more progress can be made, and while the game continues to generate cookies while turned off, this is only for a limited time. After that time has passed, the game begins generating cookies at only a fraction of its regular rate, pulling the player back into the game to reset the timer and spend the accumulated cookies, thus restarting the cycle. This design encourages players to return every few hours to ensure a continuous accumulation of in-game currency, leading to short and frequent play sessions that provide players with consistent, incremental progress throughout their day with each return to the game offering a large helping of in-game currency and the possibility of unlocking new upgrades or achievements. However, even when progress is not halted, players still tend to return frequently to idle games.

In his effort to understand the frequent play sessions among the player base of *Cookie Clicker*, Sebastian Deterding (2019) referenced Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer's assertion that nothing is more motivating than "making meaningful progress" (Amabile & Kramer's, 2011, p. 93–98). In most idle games, players continuously achieve progress in various forms. While the gameplay may entail little more than clicking on a virtual cookie and waiting, such actions can lead to hundreds of different achievements and upgrades being unlocked. Consequently, players are consistently moving towards one or several new goals, allowing them to become highly engrossed by the process of repetitively clicking on a digital cookie to generate smaller digital cookies as doing so grants a constant sense of progression and achievement.

However, previous studies have shown that this sense of progression can prove rather compelling as players of idle games not only strive to achieve progress but also seek to do so as rapidly and efficiently as possible (Cutting et al., 2019; Ruffino, 2021; Spiel et al., 2019), driving players to return frequently to expedite their progress (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018; Larsson, 2019). Rather than treating idle games as a leisurely experience that allows for sporadic engagement according to personal schedules, players frequently revisit idle games multiple times a day, driven by the desire to purchase the most recently affordable upgrade to optimize production. The desire to maximize efficiency is in accordance with the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT), which posits that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that drive human behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this instance, each new achievement unlocked or upgrade purchased leads to a feeling of competence on the player's part and motivates them to repeat this process.

This behavior can be seen even in seemingly simple idle games. *Cow Clicker*, for example, limits the player to only being able to click on a cow once every six hours, but the faster they click on that cow once the timer ends, the faster the new timer begins. As such, a player may be motivated to stay up a bit late to click on the cow to ensure they do not lose out on six hours of potential progress while they sleep.

Additionally, players have also been observed dedicating their time away from idle games to strategize and plot, often seeking assistance from the game's community (Alharthi, Toups et al., 2018; Spiel et al., 2019). Furthermore, Christoffer Larsson's study investigating idle game players found that players expressed "clear signs of a desire to maximize their efficiency and the production in the game" (Larsson, 2019, p. 28), with many participants interrupting their daily lives to ensure continued progress. Several of the interviewees interrupted their interviews to tend to the game and those who did not expressed irritation at "the lost opportunity to progress" (Larsson, 2019, p. 28), with the author arguing that this behavior signified that players had lost their feeling of autonomy and were compelled to return to the game frequently.

Monetization

Given the strong drive for progress and the fact that waiting constitutes such a core element of the idle game genre, it is a rather simple task for developers to incorporate microtransactions that profit off the impatience of players (Evans, 2016). The ease with which idle games lend themselves to exploitation has prompted developers of idle games to express a desire to be "Care-full in Design" (Spiel et al., 2019, p. 500), with many viewing microtransactions in idle games as being unethical.

This concern is substantiated by the fact that idle games exhibit an average revenue per daily active user (ARPDAU) that surpasses hyper-casual games, a subgenre of casual games categorized by simplistic user interfaces and easy-to-play designs, by a factor of nine, with approximately 37% of mobile idle games monetized primarily through in-app purchases (Bravo, 2019). These microtransactions are, in essence, "monetising player impatience" (Evans, 2016, p. 5), offering players the ability to bypass substantial portions of gameplay in exchange for real-world money. Some players perceive microtransactions as positive, allowing them to align gameplay with their schedules and providing a greater sense of control over the gaming experience, especially when their time may be limited (Carter et al., 2014; Evans, 2016), but there are also inherent risks with this form of progression.

Developers may intentionally prolong game progression to an excessive extent, not to enhance engagement or entertainment, but rather to incentivize players to spend money to circumvent tedious aspects of gameplay (Evans, 2016). This is also seen outside the idle game genre as one interviewed player reported that they quit playing *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) due to their perception that the leveling system was deliberately slowed down to promote the sale of experience point boosters exclusively available through the spending of real-world currency (Perdomo, 2021).

Another example of over-monetization is found in the idle simulation game *Virtual Villagers: Origin 2* (Last Day of Work, 2017). This game, like other instances of the series, puts the player in charge of a small group of villagers on a tropical island that they must manage, keep alive, and use to solve puzzles, but unlike other games in the series, this game featured microtransactions. Additionally, perhaps due to changing trends in the game industry, this game took several times longer to complete than earlier entries in the series despite having a comparable amount of content to its predecessors, compelling the player to spend money on microtransactions, a feature not found in earlier entries.

However, one of the game's most notable instances of microtransactions is a non-playable character (NPC) in the form of a lemur. This character, unlike many other instances of microtransactions in idle games, does not reduce the player's wait time. Instead, the lemur modifies the game's ludic efficiency: "the extent to which an interface device eases or hinders the player's attempt to perform any

given operation within the game" (Tanenbaum & Bizzochi, 2009, p. 128). In this instance, the lemur, when purchased for $9.99, would become a permanent addition to the island, repeatedly performing a task that would normally take the player considerable time and resources to complete every day. The lemur's worth is further accentuated by the game freely giving it to players during their first week of gameplay, only to later revoke it and demand payment if they wish to continue utilizing its services.

The manipulation of ludic efficiency is a prevalent practice within the idle game genre (Alharthi, Toups, et al., 2018) with one such instance being found in the game *Adventure Capitalist* (Hyper Hippo Entertainment, 2014). In this game, players begin by being put in charge of a small business, running a lemonade stand. They must click on the business every few seconds to generate in-game currency that may then be used to upgrade the lemonade stand or invest in another business that the player must also tap on at set intervals to generate in-game currency. Here players are afforded the opportunity to purchase managers who automate specific in-game businesses, freeing them from the need to repeatedly tap to produce in-game currency. However, it is important to note that these managers can only be obtained using non-premium in-game currency and are strategically designed to incentivize players to reach milestones. In contrast, the lemur in *Virtual Villagers: Origin 2* can only be obtained with real-world currency, rendering even premium currency earned slowly through daily logins and the completion of quests (Evans, 2016) ineffective as a substitute. The incorporation of the lemur serves to automate a task that was likely only integrated to entice players to purchase the lemur, and in doing so, further exemplifies how idle games can exploit the desires of their players to make continuous and steady progress.

Conclusion

The emergence of cozy games has provided players with a welcome respite from the fast-paced challenges of traditional gaming, offering a tranquil and soothing experience. Idle games share distinct similarities with cozy games in terms of their gameplay mechanics and the feelings they evoke in players. The core element of waiting in idle games aligns with the cozy genre's emphasis on safety, abundance, and softness, creating an environment that fosters a constant sense of progression and growth without the fear of failure or loss of progress.

However, while idle games may offer a cozy and comforting experience at first glance, their very nature encourages players to return frequently to optimize production. This is not intrinsically harmful as the authors of the paper "Focus Cat: Designing Idle Games to Promote Intermittent Practice and On-Going Adherence of Breathing Exercise for ADHD" (Sadprasid et al., 2022) strove to use

this nature to create an app that would keep their players performing breathing exercises consistently and at regular intervals.

Additionally, *The Longing* (Studio Seufz, 2019) is an instance of a cozy idle game that manages to merge the desire for efficiency often produced by idle games, with a feeling of calmness and tranquility often found within cozy games. This game, reminiscent of early point-and-click adventure games, begins with the player's character being ordered to wake up their king from his nap after 400 real-world days have passed. From there, the player is free to turn off the game and return over a year later to complete this task, but they may also use that time to explore the underground kingdom that their king rules over, gathering resources and discovering secrets as they wander. Additionally, this game may be considered cozy through all measures laid out by Short et al. (2018).

The player is filled with a sense of safety and abundance as there are no threats to overcome or requirements that must be met to continue playing or advancing. Additionally, softness is experienced through the game's relaxing ambient music and deliberately slow walking speed. However, the true cozy nature of this game is experienced when returning to the player's home. Initially, this is no more than an empty cave, but the player may use the resources that they have gathered throughout the kingdom to turn it into a proper home. Placing furniture, playing music, reading books, starting a fire within the fireplace, and creating personalized drawings that may be hung on the cave's wall are all actions available to the player, which not only customize the cave and make it feel more like a home but also accelerate the timer ticking down to the king's awakening. As such, it may be said that *The Longing* is a game that compels a sense of coziness within its players by feeding on their desire for efficiency, convincing them to build a home where they may experience a sense of calmness and tranquility.

However, while the idle game genre has the potential to produce a cozy experience, it is inherently compromised by the widespread integration of microtransactions. This monetization approach exploits player impatience (Larsson, 2019; Spiel et al., 2019), offering shortcuts in exchange for real-world money to bypass gameplay elements and accelerate progress. Such practices not only raise ethical concerns but also disrupt the tranquil and serene experience that defines cozy games. Consequently, continuous progression, a hallmark of the idle game genre, becomes overshadowed by the urge and temptation to spend money to avoid tedious wait times, thus undermining the genre's potential to offer a soothing and enjoyable experience. This shift towards profit-oriented design reflects a troubling trend in game development, where the intrinsic qualities of a genre are sacrificed for the sake of the developer's financial gain, detracting from the player's sense of achievement and satisfaction.

As such, while idle games can be considered part of the genre of cozy games due to their ability to evoke feelings of comfort and steady growth, the exploitation of player impatience through microtransactions both hinders player enjoyment and raises ethical questions about the game development industry's responsibility to prioritize the well-being of players over profit. This is an issue that must be addressed in order to foster an environment that upholds player enjoyment and satisfaction of its players, and in doing so, the game industry can become a haven for players seeking a serene and rewarding gaming experience.

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