The Politics of Wholesome Games: Conservative Comforts and Radical Softness

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ABSTRACT: Wholesome games are those that eschew dominant fight-or-flight logics and instead embrace softness, kindness, and warmth. While most academic and popular writing on such titles frames wholesomeness as an aesthetic or affect, in this paper I emphasize its politics in an effort to understand how these games variously reify and combat systemic oppression. My analysis focuses on the competing discourses that emerged from the first Wholesome Direct, a video showcase of then-forthcoming cozy video games. I read these perspectives from industry professionals through critical concepts from feminist media studies and queer art spaces, including nostalgia, exit, and radical softness. Through a distinction between what I call comfort and rest, I conclude that wholesome games must wear their politics on their sleeve if they wish to address the systemic issues that make many people seek them out.

From Wholesome Beginnings

As a Canadian with two left feet, I was surprised when I first learned about the popularity of square dancing in the United States. Many Americans still learn to "do-si-do" in gym class, and it is the official dance of many US states. While square dancing no doubt has its enthusiasts, it is well-documented that this institutionalized popularity is due in part to the white supremacist, antisemitic anxieties of Henry Ford, who bankrolled the widespread adoption of the dance to stave off the perceived moral degeneracy of jazz and conserve a more tradi-tional culture. As one writer notes, "Ford saw these dances as intrinsi-

cally white, and thus more intrinsically wholesome."[1] Although square dancing's contemporary sphere of influence does not tend to reach beyond classrooms and awkward social functions, it is only one of many cultural manifestations of so-called *wholesomeness*, a term one could be excused for associating with the nuclear family and white picket fences (themselves markers of straight and class privilege, respectively). Perhaps it is because square dancing is so seemingly benign and its origins are so well-documented that we can see it for what it was—an attempt at enshrining white supremacist values into public life by a wealthy, powerful fascist. But what of other, more popular wholesome pastimes?

On February 4, 2019, game developer Matthew Taylor created the Twitter account @_wholesomegames, the purpose of which was to "curate games he personally liked" and saw as having emotionally edifying characteristics.[2] In short order, the account grew to the point that several of Taylor's friends joined the project, creating a Discord server and other social media hubs to corral what was quickly morphing from a list of niche video games into a full-blown hub for players, makers, and fans of so-called wholesome games. From Taylor's first tweet on the account to its most recent, the format has remained consistent: brief descriptions of games with links to the developers' websites and several accompanying screenshots of gameplay.

As the account grew, and with it their emerging role as tastemakers for an entire category of video game, Taylor and several colleagues in the community developed a set of criteria for what a game had to do to be wholesome, which they later outlined in a Reddit Ask Me Anything (AMA) thread:

- Wholesome games are less violent when they can be (but Costume Quest is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games are less stressful when they can be (but Katamari Damacy is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games have lower stakes when they can (but Quench is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games are uplifting when they can be (but Spiritfarer is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games have positive representation of marginalized

1.Robyn Pennachia, "America's wholesome square dancing tradition is a tool of white supremacy," *Quartz* (2017); https://qz.com/1153516/americas-wholesome-square-dancing-tradition-is-a-tool-of-white-supremacy.

2. Rebekah Valentine, "Shaping a warm welcome for wholesome games," *Gamesindustry. biz* 2020; https://www.gamesindustry.biz/shaping-a-warm-welcome-for-wholesome-games.

groups when they can (but Hamtaro: Ham-Hams Unite is still wholesome)

- Wholesome games are cute and comforting when they can be (but Röki is still wholesome).[3]

Even with the above criteria in mind, the actual selection process remains fairly unclear beyond an apparent adherence to an admittedly subjective checklist of what Taylor and company believe makes a game "wholesome." (Wholesome games are less stressful than what? For whom? What does good representation look like? According to whom? Et cetera.)

Here and in much of the writing that discusses this genre, wholesomeness is framed as an aesthetic, or at most a range of emotional experiences that are encoded into games by design. The focus is on the thoughts and feelings that these games can or should evoke in players. However, as the case of Henry Ford and square dancing teaches us, it is a mistake to frame wholesomeness as just an aesthetic or even an affect lest we risk glossing over its proclivity to conceal fascism. That said, the emergence of wholesome games has not occurred in the same context as that of square dancing, and there are many who see this growing genre of games as a space of safety and inclusion that cannot be found elsewhere. To dismiss wholesome games entirely would be to ignore the many reparative and even subversive qualities that are to be found in softness, emotion, and rest.

While tastemakers and scholars alike have largely examined the wholesome game genre through its aesthetics, in this paper I emphasize its politics—those norms and assumptions that hold different meaning not just among individuals, but among larger groups like players, makers, and corporations and across vectors of privilege such as race, gender, and class. While softness and care may indeed act against the dominant logics of neoliberal capitalist society, wholesomeness also enables this troubling status quo in ways that cannot be ignored. My aim in this paper is to deepen our understanding of this tension so that we as makers, thinkers, and users of digital media can overcome it. What follows is therefore an examination of the politics of wholesomeness in game culture, both how it is represented and how it is critiqued.

My analysis is centered on the announcement and broadcast of the first Wholesome Direct, a video showcase of then-forthcoming video

3. wholesomejames, "AMA: We're the people behind Wholesome Direct, a [Keanu-less] showcase of 50+ heartwarming indie games. It premieres on YouTube tomorrow at 1 PM ET!." Reddit (2020); https://old.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/gqbiac/ama_were _the_people_behind_wholesome_direct_a/.

games that met Taylor et al.'s coziness criteria. It was a moment in which many competing discourses about wholesome games first rose to prominence in tweets and journalistic articles. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis, I read these commentaries from industry professionals through critical concepts from feminist media studies and queer art spaces such as nostalgia, exit, and radical softness. Doing so not only interrogates both the cruel optimism and the radical potential of those games one might call wholesome, but also deepens our understanding of what games are *for* and why people play in the contemporary moment.

To conclude, I describe a key implication from this analysis: a distinction between *comfort* and *rest*, which is emblematized in the ways wholesome games simultaneously reify and subvert the status quo. I see *comfort* as encapsulating the ways the desire to escape from the anxieties and inequities of everyday life enables such oppression to persist. In contrast, I present *rest* as a way of honoring the fact that feeling exhausted by the contemporary moment is a very real experience, while suggesting that we can seek temporary escapes as a way of building the energy necessary to return and work against this systemic exhaustion. Understanding and heeding the difference between these concepts is useful not only for discussing the politics of wholesome games, but also for reflecting on the larger role games play in reifying our present system, as well as the roles they may yet play in dismantling it. Before discussing this, however, we must first lay out the events leading up to and directly following the Wholesome Direct, for which some words on how wholesomeness in digital culture has been framed by others is necessary.

Curling Up with a Good Book: Literatures of Coziness

One difficulty with documenting existing writing on wholesome games is that much of what I have read calls them by other names. One of the early and most helpful pieces on the subject is designer Brie Code's (2017) description of "tend-and-befriend" games as those that make you "want to protect your loved ones, to seek out your allies, and to form new alliances" as opposed to the more common "fight-or-flight" games that involve "stress" and "a lot of things flashing on the screen."[4] Her advocating for games whose focus on "care and characters" allows players to experience the tend-and-befriend response prefigures the emergence of the Wholesome Games account and movement, even if she never uses the term.[5]

4. Brie Code, "Slouching toward relevant video games," *Gamesindustry.biz* (2017). https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2017-03-08-slouching-toward-relevant-video-games.

5. Ibid.

In contrast, scholars Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) name whole-some games as one among several like-terms they unite under the um-brella of "cozy games."[6] Useful here is their observation that, given both design trends and the contemporary state of the world, the pop-ularity of "games exploring the themes of safety, abundance, and soft-ness is neither sudden nor surprising."[7] They also helpfully connect these games to "the feeling of nostalgia," suggesting that they act as a form of escape from the political and ecological anxieties of the con-temporary moment.[8] Still, Waszkiewicz and Bakun's paper largely serves to codify coziness as an aesthetic category in games that, while undoubtedly useful, results in a celebration of these games without an interrogation of the wider politics of coziness/wholesomeness. In-spired by their groundwork, I attempt in this paper to assess whether wholesome games can meaningfully address the material conditions that have rendered them necessary.

In want of more ambivalent perspectives on wholesomeness in digital culture, I look to Youngblood's discussion of LuxieGames, a queer livestreamer, and her performance of "cozy wholesomeness" on Twitch during the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] The author frames Luxie's wholesomeness as affective labor, a "radical optimism and unity" that resists the individualistic loneliness and cynicism of neoliberal capi-talism but nonetheless takes a toll on the streamer.[10] After describing a particularly difficult broadcast during which Luxie's stress moved her to tears, Youngblood is quick to note that her feeling overwhelmed "was in no small part due to the sheer exhaustion of maintaining her streaming schedule."[11]

While he agrees with the preceding authors that there is a critical potential to what we call wholesome and cozy, Youngblood rightly cautions that such values are always already repackaged and com-modified in ways that serve the status quo rather than overwrite it. As Federici notes, the "development of self-management [is] an essential requirement in a capitalist socio-economic system" because it out-sources the responsibilities of government onto individuals, and the affective, gig-like labor of Twitch streaming is a prime example of

6. Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun, "Towards the aesthetics of cozy games," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 12:3 (2020): p. 225.

7. Ibid, p. 228.

8. Ibid, p. 227.

9. Jordan Youngblood, "A Labor of (Queer) Love: Maintaining 'Cozy Wholesomeness' on Twitch during COVID-19 and Beyond," *Television & New Media* 23:5 (2022): p. 531.

10. Ibid, p. 534.

11. Ibid, p. 538.

this.[12] The cultivation of "optimism and unity" on a cozy livestream is both a reprieve from labor and an effort that requires labor in a way that acts as a self-perpetuating cycle.[13] Let us now turn to the Wholesome Direct as a way to better understand the interplay of coziness and capital in the context of game culture and design. To begin, let me tell you a story.

Prologue: The Wholesome Direct

February 2020: for many, the notion that we would soon be embroiled in a global health crisis was not even a remote possibility. Within game culture discourse, then, people's main concerns lay in things that hindsight makes seem absurd, including the fact that it had been five months since the last Nintendo Direct, the name given to a series of video presentations given by Nintendo to entice consumers with the next big titles in development or about to be released. Since the first Direct in 2011, they have become well-loved media events that garner millions of viewers and droves of reaction videos and articles. In February 2020, fans of Nintendo and indeed game culture at large were devoting countless keystrokes to guesswork and frustration. A Direct would ultimately occur that March, but it would be the last one for some time.

Fast forward to April, and the global awareness of just how severe this whole coronavirus thing might be had grown exponentially. As various institutions and corporations scrambled to reimagine what production and consumption looked like under the thumb of a life-threatening virus, the vast expanse of time that we had begun to refer to as "before" the pandemic only became foggier by the day, giving way to new and *unprecedented* times that made many yearn for those that were now implicitly and agonizingly *precedented*.

In defining the concept of nostalgia, Boym (2001) states that it consists of "fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the present" that "have a direct impact on the future."[14] To long for a bygone era instead of addressing the here and now can only make today's unchecked problems grow into tomorrow's. And even if these early days of COVID were characterized by many glaring uncertainties that easily explain the emergence of a collective longing[15] for *anywhen* else,

12. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 149.

13. For a discussion of other ways games and capitalism combine to create an endless cycle of exhaustion, see: Rainforest Scully-Blaker, "Re-Framing the Backlog: Radical Slowness and Patient Gaming," In *Ecogames*, ed. Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning, and Gerald Farca (Amsterdam: U. Amsterdam Press, 2024).

14. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xvi.

15. For one example, see: Tim Wulf, Johannes S. Breuer, and Josephine B. Schmitt, "Es-

Boym's warning still applies. The pursuit of nostalgia represents an impossible desire to repeat what is ultimately "unrepeatable," both because the episode has clearly passed and because nostalgia tends to celebrate one aspect of something without reflection on its other facets.[16] As was the case with Ford and square dancing, one must always ask: For *whom* were the good ol' days actually *good*?

Returning to April 2020, many video games unsurprisingly saw production delays during this period and, quite soon after the sudden cancellation of that year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), sources[17] indicated that even the online-only Nintendo Direct would likely not re-emerge for some time. It was in this context that the first Wholesome Direct was announced, a showcase of 55 indie games variously loaded with uplifting or comforting content, and a culmination of the swift rise in @_wholesomegames's popularity that Waszkiewicz and Bakun rightly associate with, among other things, the anxieties of the contemporary moment.

While wholly distinct from Nintendo Directs, the Wholesome Direct was clearly inspired by this longer-standing series of presentations in both name and format. The organizers have explicitly cited both Nintendo Directs and the cancellation of E3 as inspiration for the production of this 37-minute collection of trailers for forthcoming titles.[18] And while the broadcast itself is certainly notable in the history of wholesome games, what emerged from the Direct is my focus here: the varied responses I refer to as "wholesome discourses."

Hot Takes and Wholesome Discourses

Shortly after the Wholesome Direct premiered on May 26, 2020, many took to Twitter to discuss the impact, optics, and politics of wholesome games, which resulted in several competing perspectives or, as one says on the platform, "takes." I have grouped a selection of these tweets into three attitudes I believe encapsulate wholesome discourse in ways that helpfully illustrate the ambivalent politics of wholesomeness in the contemporary moment.

Following Rose's (2001) sense of Foucauldian discourse analysis, I consider discourse as being expressed both through "visual images and verbal texts" and "the practices of institutions [. . .] issues of

caping the pandemic present: The relationship between nostalgic media use, escapism, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic," *Psychology of Popular Media* 11:3 (2022): 258–65.

16. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia* (above n. 14), p. xvii.

17. Bradly Shankar, "E3 2020 has officially been cancelled," *MobileSyrup*, 2020; https://mobilesyrup.com/2020/03/11/e3-2020-cancelled/.

18. wholesomejames, AMA (above, n. 3).

power, regimes of truth, institutions and technologies."[19] Though I begin by laying out several tweets that exhibit a particular attitude towards the direct, for each such cluster I then introduce theoretical concepts to situate these disparate perspectives against the larger backdrop of game culture under neoliberal capitalism. In so doing, I hope to show not only what people find so inspiring about wholesome games, but also what is at stake if this inspiration is explored uncritically.

The first broad category of tweets came largely from game makers who sought to problematize the implications of the term "wholesome":

> (secretly relieved over this discourse bc i can finally yell how much i hate forced positivity+am extremely leftist & very worried & aware of how ppl could otherwise take something like this & reduce a game to its "marketability"+"value" as wholesome or not a la "family values")[20]

> Re "wholesome"—the opposite of an aesthetic of exploitation and violence is not an aesthetic of softness and giving, it's the design and stories told against the grain of the reduction to uncritical aesthetics.[21]

> the ire i'm seeing, an ire i share, stems from the branding/scenes surrounding them becoming increasingly reductive and playing to an image that can undermine the power of real kindness in games.[22]

In many ways, these takes recall Youngblood's observation about emotional labor on Twitch and the lengths to which capitalism goes to capitalize. Notably, these three tweets all came from people whose games could feasibly be assigned the "wholesome" label by outside observers/players. Their motivations for making this argument, then, are not just to suggest that the term "wholesome" risks de-fanging the critical potential of games that center kindness or softness, but also to distance themselves and their work from the curatorial reach of the Wholesome Games team. That artists would reject labels they have not chosen for themselves is nothing new, but it remains noteworthy that a seemingly positive term is so readily cast aside.

These responses, particularly the gesturing to *real kindness*, evoke what queer poet and artist Lora Mathis calls "radical softness," the no-

19. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 140

20. cloutsocks, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/cloutsocks/status/12656358 63498756096.

21. hannahnicklin, Twitter, May 26, 2020. https://twitter.com/hannahnicklin/status /1265428360005668870.

22. MaxKriegerVG, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/MaxKriegerVG/status /1265670361246502915.

tion that "sharing your emotions is a political move and a tactic against a society which prioritizes a lack of emotions."[23] Such a willful failure to conform to social standards recalls Halberstam's notion of queer failure, which "quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."[24] Under neoliberal individualism, kindness and softness are powerful critiques against heteropatriarchal norms, but the anxiety expressed by the above commenters is that the moniker of "wholesome games" is too entrenched in logics of profit and marketability to be anything approaching failure.[25]

A second group of takes came from a wider swath of people; here I quote a games journalist, a game maker/artist, and the head of an indie studio. The essential argument is that one should not be so heavy-handed in their critique of so-called wholesome games since these are often titles that are made and enjoyed by minoritized players and that do important work to improve one's mental health in ways more mainstream games may not. Developing a language around wholesome games is therefore helpful since it gives makers and players a shared understanding of how to describe games that emphasize tend-and-befriend mechanics and/or aesthetics. Important to note here is that this position seems not to have emerged in direct response to the critiques of wholesomeness articulated above. Rather, it seems to engage with bad-faith criticisms of these and other nonnormative designs in game culture:

> on the real i think "wholesome" is less about the games themselves than the nourished feeling people get when they finally play games that represent them / explore complex stuff we don't often see / prioritize things that aren't violence [26]

> Genuinely amazed that some people are taking issue with games that are intended to help people chill out and feel good. [. . .] "Wholesome games" are often made by marginalised folks who who (sic) are trying to bring something different, personal and genuine to the table, and these are the people whose work you are calling out as vacuous and fake.[27]

23. Lora Mathis, "radical softness as a method," *Tumblr*, 2015. https://phemiec .tumblr.com/post/133442574730/lora-mathis-radical-softness-as-a-weapon-lora.

24. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2011), p. 88.

25. See: John Fiske, "Understanding Popular Culture," In *The Audience Studies Reader*, ed. W. Brooker and D. Jermyn (New York: Routledge, 2003), 112–16. Fiske's concepts of "excorporation" and incorporation offer one useful account of how, under capitalism, counterculture is subsumed into culture.

26. xpatriciah, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/xpatriciah/status/12656403 73185060867.

27. Wrenegadey, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/Wrenegadey/status/12658 54101188784129.

Funny how people have decided to dunk on "wholesome" games, a genre that
generally has a lot of developers that are NOT MEN
What a strange and unrelated coincidence
It's oversaturated??? Oh yeah but edgy shootymcshootersons & crappy plat-
formers we defo need more of them[28]

These tweets offer a vital reminder of what is at stake in this conver-
sation and for whom the stakes are higher than for others. Although I
take certain critiques of wholesomeness seriously, there are other rea-
sons these games are maligned that are far less constructive. As Shira
Chess writes, games that appeal to those outside the cis, straight,
white, hetero, manosphere are "overlooked and dismissed as having
no importance or value" far too often.[29]

Game culture and the games industry are both exceedingly hostile
to minoritized voices, and the discourse around wholesome games
has been no exception. Here I think of Sara Ahmed's work on institu-
tions, exit, and feminist complaint, particularly her emphasis on how
the dominant system makes it "costly to expose" how systemic op-
pression operates.[30] Ahmed herself became illustrative of this "cost"
when she resigned from her position at Goldsmiths and left the phys-
ical institution of academia (a space she could "no longer inhabit"),
while noting that "other feminists in the same situation might stay
because they cannot afford to leave, or because they have not lost the
will to keep chipping away at those walls."[31] This set of tweets reminds
us that the less support marginalized people have within game cul-
ture, the more likely that such necessary but involuntary exits will
occur.

Finally, I came across a number of people (the three cited here are
game makers and artists) who were glad that the Wholesome Direct
had taken place but were loath to apply the "wholesome" label to
their own work and concerned about the ways the term might be es-
sentialized by wider audiences:

 mainly i am glad that there's a market segment that connects with players that
is smaller than all of "indie games." because that was too large to be particularly
useful. it's great marketing, and that's important because i want people to get

28. Vialixia, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/Vialixia/status/1265685937574
600708.

29. Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 5.

30. Sara Ahmed, "Refusal, Resignation, and Complaint," *feministkilljoys* 2018. https://
feministkilljoys.com/2018/06/28/refusal-resignation-and-complaint/.

31. Sara Ahmed, "Resignation Is a Feminist Issue," *feministkilljoys*, 2016. https://feminist
killjoys.com/2016/08/27/resignation-is-a-feminist-issue/.

paid for making their games. but of course, like most successful marketing, it's going to erase a lot of the complexities and interesting tensions within the actual games.[32]

I'd never brand my own work as "wholesome," especially since it's become synonym with "twee"; and yet, the fact that there is an interest in games branded as such, gives me a platform from which I can hopefully bring meaningful experiences to people.[33]

> excited to see successful cooperation between small studios and developers, especially outside of big industry
> my enthusiasm is cooled by ~comfy~ as a marketing strategy
> cozy as a shorthand for "cute, laid back, easy to consume" undersells much of what it is applied to.[34]

While this final batch of takes agrees with Code that there is value in those games that buck hegemonic design trends, it also suggests the moniker of wholesomeness may be more harmful than many may hope.

To me, this set of responses to the Wholesome Direct recalls what Berlant calls a *cruel optimism*—"when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[35] On the one hand, wholesome games espouse a set of values that runs counter to those we normally see in "fight or flight" games; they represent a desire for interactions grounded in cooperation and care. However, in rendering these games legible to the market through a formalized language of "Wholesome Games," the minds behind the Direct have placed that initial desire in jeopardy by embracing the logics of neoliberal capitalism.

While many so-called wholesome games have emerged in response to the fears and anxieties surrounding the material realities of their (often marginalized) creators, the move to formalize wholesome games as a genre has glossed over this lineage and instead invited the cultivation of softness for softness's sake. Recalling Mathis and Halberstam, while radical softness *fails* under the logics of our present system, the softness of the wholesome games movement is instead a *success*, in no small part because it has avoided directly challenging the systemic conditions that many have suggested render it, and such games, necessary.

32. v21, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/v21/status/1265549347053338624.

33. FlorianVltmn, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/FlorianVltmn/status/1265554501760622592.

34. everestpipkin, Twitter, May 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/everestpipkin/status/1265598583136534534.

35. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2011), p. 1.

Here one may look back at the history of square dancing and suggest that, unlike Henry Ford, the Wholesome Games team is not using their platform to forcefully ascribe moral virtue to a particular set of racial, gendered, or classed signifiers. From what I have read, it seems like the founders of this community genuinely want to share these games with a wider audience in the name of broadening who and what are given space in game culture. But the nostalgic gloss of wholesomeness existed well before Ford and persists to this day. Good faith is not enough to avoid perpetuating the same oppressive logics that compel people to seek softer experiences, let alone to meaningfully change these logics; one's actions must be backed up by clear intentions.[36]

On Comfort and Rest—A Last Word on Wholesome Politics

In many ways I share Waszkiewicz and Bakun's views on the importance of coziness in games and am equally mindful of the work done by Chess and others[37] to show that games of this ilk represent an unjustly devalued piece of game culture. Designing a "wholesome" game rather than something more conventional can be a subversive, if not decidedly political, act. For that act to be truly legible as political, however, the wholesomeness must be more than skin-deep. If such a game does not also acknowledge the larger social issues that are making you (the player) seek out this experience, or circumstances that are allowing you (the avatar) to have the experience, then it is an individual escape that tolerates the present system, not a radical, emancipatory statement. This applies to both wholesome games and the discourses that surround them.

In an interview, Wholesome Games co-founder James Tillman said, "Violence can be wholesome, frankly," and went on:

> We see what protesters around the country have done in the past couple of months. I would be the last person to say, "Hey, calm down guys, this isn't wholesome." Fighting for good things is wholesome. So we leave a spot for that.[38]

Given the date of the interview, his comment about protesters almost certainly refers to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United

36. Since I began this research, the Wholesome Games team has become more deliberate about addressing some of this, although their self-reflection does not fully address the concerns outlined in this paper. For details, see: Wholesome Games, "FAQ," *Wholesome Games*, 2023. https://wholesomegames.com/#faq.

37. For example: Mia Consalvo and Chris Paul, *Real Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).

38. Valentine, "Shaping" (above, n. 2).

States, whose long-standing opposition to police violence and racial violence against Black people returned to cultural prominence in May 2020 with the murder of George Floyd by a police officer who alleged that Floyd had passed a counterfeit $20 bill.

In the months since this heinous event, the Wholesome Games Twitter account has made only one post relating to the Black Lives Matter movement, and any mentions of violence in the account's history have been limited to games not having violence or to the player having to fight "only if you have to" and "terrible creatures from long ago."[39,40] Tillman's claim that violence can be wholesome is well and good, then, but it seems that the actual curatorial scope at Wholesome Games is less radical in practice than one might hope.[41]

The Wholesome Direct does good work to bring together people who want to make, sell, and play a particular subset of games, but it does so at the cost of essentializing wholesomeness as an unobtrusive aesthetic that exists for its own sake, which, recalling radical softness, could not be further from the truth. In Mathis's own words, one purpose of the "unapologetic vulnerability" of radical softness is that "being upfront about what pains us helps us learn our hurt and allows others to know they are not alone [. . . our pain] becomes less of a terrifying, shapeless cloud and more of a thing that can be tackled, little by little, each day."[42] Although the practice of radical softness may begin with the individual, there is a clear sense here that it reaches outward to one's wider community. Rather than existing for its own sake, radical softness responds to lived experiences and seeks to name systemic oppression while cultivating lasting communities of care through the solidarity of shared experiences.

There is undoubtedly a critical potential in kindness and care, but it is clear from the preceding analysis that not all softness is radical. The way wholesome games are framed by many players and tastemakers like Tillman suggests that their role is to instill *comfort*, a term I use here to suggest that one is content with their present and is therefore less inclined to think about their future. Whether an individual is in-

39. _wholesomegames, Twitter, March 21, 2020. https://twitter.com/_wholesome games/status/1241381250872508418.

40. _wholesomegames, Twitter, Sept. 30, 2019. https://twitter.com/_wholesome games/status/1178678577992278018.

41. For more on the murkiness of the wholesome game moniker, see: Kat Brewster, "Priceless Play – 30 May 2020," *RockPaperShotgun*, 2020. https://www.rockpapershotgun .com/priceless-play-30-may-2020.

42. Lora Mathis, "Vulnerability as a Healing Force," *Hooligan Mag,* 2016; https://www .hooliganmag.com/features/2016/6/21/vulnerability-as-a-healing-force-j6bxj.

sulated by an escapist nostalgia or their systemic privileges, if one is well and truly *comfortable*, then why would they seek alternatives to the status quo? In this sense, comfort is a conservative affect, *it is an enemy of change* and, through its inaction, a reification of those material conditions that make many seek out wholesome games to begin with.

If players, makers, and fans of wholesome games wish to avoid the trap of comfort and instead confront the material reality that leaves so many with barely enough energy to make do within an inequitable system, then I believe that *rest* is a more generative and regenerative aspiration. As poet and activist Tricia Hersey writes, "the time is up for any shallow wellness work that doesn't speak of dismantling systems that are making us unwell. We must blame and interrogate the systems."[43] Ahmed reminds us that this is nontrivial work: "when you expose a problem you pose a problem," but the difficulty of this task does not diminish its necessity.[44] Hersey writes: "We are resting not to do more [. . .] for a capitalist system," but rather to occupy "a generative space [. . .] for liberation and healing to take root."[45] Rest therefore serves as a refusal and interrogation of the present system while also restoring to us the energy necessary to do the work of building a system that enables our collective flourishing. What could be more tantalizing to a devotee of wholesome games than the notion of a society in which warmth, kindness, and camaraderie are not subversive game design praxis, but fixtures in everyday life?

As I draw this analysis to a close, I am inclined to return to the worn notion that video games are a form of escape. Under the logics of neoliberalism, where everyone has the freedom and the opportunity to be the agent of their own success or failure, the genre of wholesome games would seem to be tailor-made to assuage such anxieties, but whether this is in the service of *comfort* or of *rest* becomes a vital consideration. Instead of wholly accepting or refuting the claim that games are escapes, I wonder whether the question is actually what one *can* escape through video games and what one *cannot*.

One can doubtless play a video game to experience a thrilling story, to develop connections to virtual characters, to simply turn off their brain for a while, or even to feel they have control over some small pocket of their lives, but these experiences are temporary. All of us, but particularly those who only have limited access to leisure, must eventually return to some version of the material lived conditions of our

43. Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance* (Boston: Little, Brown Spark, 2022), p. 133.

44. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2017), p. 37.

45. Hersey, *Rest* (above, n. 42), p. 153.

daily lives. As such, there is nothing inherently *wrong*, to me, with using a video game as a temporary reprieve from the difficulties of everyday life. Such an escape is quite distinct from the (very necessary) exits described by Ahmed; perhaps by finding *rest* in a game, one might gather the energy necessary to return and *keep chipping away at those walls* in service of building something better.

Video games in general and wholesome games in particular can be useful sites of rest, but that potential is eliminated if they instead take us away from the work worth doing with the promise of comfort, particularly given that with which we risk becoming comfortable. *For whom were the good ol' days actually good? And who is at risk in our present and in our future?* Brie Code understands this well when she writes that "care is not weak, simple, or cute. It doesn't only belong in simple or cute games. Caring for your chosen loved ones and the formation of new alliances are sophisticated actions and can be acts of warfare."[46] Here I am reminded of Deleuze's claim that, in the struggle against hegemonic control, "there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons."[47] If we can dismantle the comfort of wholesomeness and embrace rest, then those games we might call cozy, comfy, or even radically soft may be one such weapon.

46. Code, "Slouching" (above, n. 4).

47. Giles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," In *Negotiations 1972–1990*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1992), p. 178.