

For the gamers keeping it cosy

PLAY!

Cyrus Nemati: “A BAFTA nomination was validating”

Virtual safe space

Cosy games are leading the way for queer representation

Puzzles and peace

How nostalgia made Professor Layton one gamer’s favourite series

Therapy that bites back

Step into the doctor’s shoes in Vampire Therapist

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Why the Professor Layton series are one gamer's favourite games



Editor's Letter

Welcome to Play!, a new magazine for gamers who enjoy cosy and relaxing games. Our aim is to be a source of inspiration, information and community for those who enjoy this genre of games, no matter how often they play.

Our target audience is primarily women aged 18-35. Research by Brandwatch found that female gamers are involved in 55% of cosy gaming conversations online compared to 25% of other gaming conversations. Our readers are passionate about creating time for themselves with relaxing hobbies, shopping with small businesses and creating a more accepting world. However, we recognise that anyone can enjoy cosy games and we want to be as inclusive as possible to anyone who may enjoy the magazine even if they don't fit our target audience.

Games that have low stakes and promote more relaxed gameplay have existed since the 1980s but recently grew in popularity with releases such as Stardew Valley (2016) and Animal Crossing: New Horizons (2020). Both of these games have sold over 40 million copies, demonstrating that cosy games are a valuable sector in the gaming industry with a large audience. They've also been shown to help with mental health issues because of their relaxing nature. We believe that a magazine focusing on these games is long-overdue.

Play! will be published quarterly with a bigger focus on digital to meet the gaming fans where they currently are. Though our main outlet will be digital, we believe a print magazine is important in a time when younger audiences are becoming more interested in tangible and collectable media. The website will be available for free and print issues will be sold through a mixture of single copies and subscriptions, available in shops such as HMV and online. Social media will also be incredibly important for us and we will focus on Instagram, YouTube and Discord.

We're reaching out to you because we want you to join the journey and be one of our advertisers. We know that our

readers will be interested in your brand because you embody them. Advertising will be available in our print magazine, as full or half page ads and written advertorials, or on our website in the form of reviews and affiliate links. We also have plans to introduce events such as a gaming convention, which you would be able to sponsor.

In this sample issue, you'll find the type of content we would publish online and in our print magazine. Our main feature looks at the importance of LGBTQ+ representation in gaming and how cosy games fit into it, including interviews with queer gamers. For our developer interview, we spoke to Cyrus Nemati, founder of Little Bat Games and creator of the visual novel Vampire Therapist, which we also reviewed. We also have a personal piece on why one gamer loves the Professor Layton series as part of a regular column.

We hope you enjoy this sample content and want to become an advertiser. We're confident that a partnership together would be beneficial for both you and us.

Phoebe Leonard
Phoebe Leonard
Editor-in-Chief



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The Download

Welcome to your round-up of some of the recent news in the cosy gaming world!

Discounty gets release date

Ever dreamed of owning a shop? Crinkle Cut Games have announced that their supermarket management simulator Discounty will be available on 21 August. In the harbour town of Blomkest, you take over ownership of your aunt's discount supermarket to help expand her business. You'll design the shop, manage stock levels and serve customers on the tills. But rapid expansion could upset some of the community, so be careful not to prioritise money over everything.



New The Sims 4 pack announced

Simmers rejoice: fairies are finally coming to The Sims 4! EA have announced the next expansion pack, 'Enchanted by Nature', releasing on 10 July. It includes fully playable Fairy Sims with customisable wings, skin tones, tattoos and more. Unlock the new world of Innisgreen, craft natural remedies to cure ailments and forage for food as a nomad. There's also a variety of lots built by Sims 4 creators, including a community garden, residential plots and a bar.



Tales of the Shire releases gameplay trailer

Get ready Hobbits, the highly anticipated Tales of the Shire is coming soon. Ahead of the game's release on 29 July, developer Weta Workshop has released a gameplay trailer. Explore the village of Bywater and help it thrive by trading with your neighbours. You can decorate your Hobbit Hole however you wish to fully express yourself and spend your days fishing, gardening, foraging and, of course, eating good food.



Disney Dreamlight Valley's next plans revealed

Disney Dreamlight Valley have revealed their plans for the game for the rest of 2025. The free 'Mysteries of Skull Rock' update introduces Peter Pan and the Lost Boys and you can unlock exclusive items in the latest Star Path. Players who have The Storybook Vale expansion pass will get to experience its finale chapter 'The Unwritten Realms' and befriend characters from Sleeping Beauty. There's also a competition where you can help design a new companion that all players will get for free!



Image credits (top to bottom): Crinkle Cut Games, EA, Weta Workshop, Disney Dreamlight Valley



More than pixels: how games help queer players feel seen

Phoebe Leonard explores the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusion in gaming and how cosy games are leading the way

For Chloe, a 22-year-old bisexual woman, a game doesn't need to have queer characters for her to play it, but it makes the experience a lot more enjoyable.

"It always makes me appreciate the game so much more when there's representation," she says. "Even if there isn't a main character that's LGBTQ+, having a side character where their queerness isn't the butt of a joke makes me trust and enjoy the game more."

Chloe is far from the only one with this view. According to a study by LGBTQ+ organisation GLAAD, gamers who identify as queer are 4-5 times more likely to buy a game with a queer main character and 1.4 times more likely to buy a game that allows them to play as their gender.

One of the reasons that players seek out games with queer representation is because it allows them to explore themselves and their identity, says Dr Liam Cahill, a lecturer in LGBTQ+ psychology at Nottingham Trent University.

"When queer players can create avatars that reflect their gender identity, it helps to validate them and create a sense of belonging. For many people, games become a safe space where they can explore and express who they are without fear of judgment."

Early beginnings

One of the earliest video games to feature a queer character was the 1986 murder mystery game *Moonmist*. In

one of the storylines, a character called Vivien is jealous and betrayed after another woman, Deidre, seemingly chose a man over her. Though Vivien is never explicitly stated to have been with Deidre in a romantic way, their implied relationship in her dialogue means she is seen as the first depiction of a lesbian in a game.

But one of the biggest breakthroughs in LGBTQ+ representation in gaming was in 1999, thanks to *The Sims*. In a demonstration of the game at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), two female Sims unexpectedly shared a kiss, sending waves through the audience and reporting media. Every Sim was programmed as bisexual, with the option to develop romantic relationships with both men and women and the *Sims* series has continued to foster representation in the following games, including adding more complex gender customisation options to *The Sims 4* in 2016.

Since these games, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters and themes has gradually increased, but there's still a way to go. Nearly 5000 games are tagged with 'LGBTQ+' on game storefront Steam, but on the Nintendo Switch store, only 60 games are available under the same search. It seems that while representation is important to gamers, developers don't always feel the same. So why is it so important to include queer characters and storylines in games?

Why representation matters

Dr James Cummings, a lecturer in gender, sexuality and

identity at the University of York, says that representation in media is important to help LGBTQ+ youth grow up feeling accepted.

"Media representation has the power to change popular opinions and validate diverse LGBTQ+ lives and is vital. Gaming is a space where people can experience alternative worlds, find community and derive self-worth that can be empowering in their out-of-game lives."

GLAAD's study revealed that representation in games truly does have an impact on queer players in real life, with 72% of LGBTQ gamers saying that seeing characters with their gender identity and/or sexual orientation represented positively makes them feel better about themselves. This demonstrates the significance of representation and why it's important for developers to include in their games, even if it seems like something small.

For people like Willow*, a 22-year-old bisexual woman, video games can help them explore their identity safely and figure out who they are. "Games are amazing for self-discovery because they allow you to try on a different version of yourself, potentially a more confident and openly queer version who might not be ready to walk through the real world yet."

Queerness in cosy games

Cosy games have developed a reputation for being queer-inclusive and friendly, especially those made by independent developers. *Stardew Valley*, for example, is a highly popular cosy game created by independent developer ConcernedApe (real name Eric Barone). It's become a game that many queer players love due to its approach to sexuality – the player can romance any of the 12 dateable non-player characters, regardless of gender.

Willow believes this non-labelled approach worked well for the game because it allows a player to truly be themselves. "It's a great example of where leaving out labels is done right. It's for the purpose of allowing the player step into the game and letting them see themselves in the world, and this is part

of what representation is about."

Another cosy game that has been praised for its queer inclusion is *Wylde Flowers*, created by Studio Drydock. The opening shot of the game includes a pride flag fluttering in the breeze and the protagonist Tara can romance male, female and non-binary characters. In an interview with *Pocket Tactics*, concept artist Iona Vorster stated that "inclusivity was always at the top of the list" when designing the game and that it was built for "people that don't often get to see themselves represented in games". *Wylde Flowers* also won the *Gayming Magazine* award for Best LGBTQ Indie Game in 2023.

But it isn't just the games that are inclusive – the cosy game community is also well-known for being accepting of queer players. The Facebook group *Cozy Gamers* has a specific channel for LGBTQ+ gamers and a search for 'queer' on *r/CozyGamers* brings up plenty of players giving each other advice about games that will help them feel represented.

Both Chloe and Willow agree that they feel safer in the cosy gaming community than other places online. Willow believes hate will turn up in most online spaces, but the cosy gaming community seems less affected by it. "I've mostly come across like-minded individuals, which might be because creating that safe space is part of the 'cosiness' that these gamers value", she explains.

Chloe believes that part of the community's friendliness towards queer players is because those who previously felt alienated are trying to make things better for others. "I think there's a large portion of cosy games that are made by queer people for queer people that fill gaps where we haven't been seen in the past. I can't think of a community that attracts more LGBTQ+ players."

Though there is more to be done for queer representation in gaming, it's clear that cosy games are leading the way. Other genres should look to them as an example on how to include queer characters in a way that does more than just tick a box and truly helps gamers feel more comfortable in their identities.

*Name has been changed

"There's a large portion of cosy games that are made by queer people for queer people"

Wylde Flowers includes male, female and non-binary characters



Image credits (left to right): Generated by AI, Studio Drydock



Image credit: Little Bat Games

Vampires have some unique issues to work through

‘Our anxieties are nothing to be embarrassed about’: Interview with Vampire Therapist creator

For this issue’s developer interview, Cyrus Nemati, 44, tells us about making Vampire Therapist and being nominated for a BAFTA

What inspired you to make Vampire Therapist?

It all started with the revelation that for all their ‘coolness’, vampires don’t actually do very much other than look sexy and drink blood. That raised a lot of questions about what could make a vampire feel fulfilled or unfulfilled. I’m also an amateur historian and love using the past to examine our present. Since psychology itself is largely neurology, I can safely say that a vampire from 3000 years ago has similar issues to a person today!

You consulted therapists to make sure the advice given was accurate. What was this process like?

Working with experts has been my favourite part of development. Our therapist counsel primarily helped us iron down the cognitive distortions (irrational thoughts) we were going to use and helped us validate the language we were using to describe them. I had them vet every distortion in the script to see if they made sense. I learned a lot about how these thoughts work literally versus in practice, which could only have been checked by a therapist.

Do you think that the game has helped people with their mental health? Was this a goal you had?

I know it has! Reading reviews has been incredibly gratifying, with many claiming that the game has altered their way of thinking. I’ve seen streamers playing the game coming to surprising revelations about themselves. But it wasn’t a specific goal, necessarily. If there was a psychological goal, it was to confirm that our anxieties and hangups are nothing new and absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about.

What influenced the art style of the game?

Vampires are creatures of the night, but we didn’t want ‘gritty’. We wanted to tell players, ‘If you are ready for a quiet reflective look at the self, this is a welcome place to be.’ Our character art was a more specific direction. The game is an emotional comedy, which is an unusual space, so we worked a long time on finding the balance between reality and comedy. I’m very proud of the art style we found; it was perfect for Vampire Therapist.

How did it feel to be nominated for a BAFTA Games award?

It was surprising, as it’s 11 years since a German-made game was nominated for a BAFTA, but also validating. We knew we were never going to make a massive Dark Souls-like hit, but we’re eternally (get it) grateful that our work was viewed on its merits. It’s kind of a studio ethos that we consider nothing “above” us and nothing “below” us. We’re all more capable than we give ourselves credit for.

Do you have any plans for your next game? Anything in the works?

We’re in production on our next game. It will have the same blend of rigorous research, refined and profane comedy, challenging themes, and theatrical style that we hope to make a studio hallmark. Expect some forgotten shapers of history and maybe another deservedly vicious Ayn Rand joke.

Find out more about Cyrus Nemati at cyrusontheinternet.com.

You can read more about Vampire Therapist and find out where to play at vampiretherapist.com.

Vampire Therapist review: A game to sink your teeth into

Beneath the witty dialogue and eclectic characters, this game has self-acceptance and care at its heart

by Phoebe Leonard

I’ve always been quite intrigued by the concept of vampires and I’m a huge advocate for mental health awareness so, as a game that combines the two, Vampire Therapist was immediately interesting to me. You play as Sam Walls, a vampire cowboy who has discovered he wants to help other vampires feel better in themselves. Guided by ancient vampire Andromachos (called Andy by his friends), Sam begins his therapy clinic and meets a wide array of colourful clients.

Starting off, the art style feels perfect for more relaxed gameplay where the main focus isn’t the graphics. Because of the visual novel format, the characters don’t move or animate; instead, they change slightly with different emotions and gestures. This was quite different to most games I’ve played but I really liked it because it allowed me to focus on the actual object of the game – helping the clients with their problems.

The characters are definitely one of the best parts of the game. The personalities and backgrounds are incredibly varied, including a Renaissance woman, a scientist and a theatre actor. There are also a few humans that are surprisingly accepting of (and attracted to) the vampires that they interact with. Plus, the voice acting is amazing and truly places you into the story, which is even more impressive given that it’s a very small cast. I’m not entirely sure that Cyrus Nemati isn’t secretly a 200-year-old vampire cowboy.

When it comes to the therapy itself, I thought the mental health information was very well integrated and it didn’t feel

like the game was just trying to push a lot of information on you. The notebook function with past session notes also proved very helpful as sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between some of the more similar cognitive distortions. I was also glad to see Andy’s insistence that Sam should go through therapy himself, as this made the game a lot more realistic (or as realistic as a vampire game can be).

Although I enjoyed the game there are couple of things that I think may not suit some people as much. If you’re someone who prefers a game where you can move around more, this probably isn’t for you. It’s mostly just going through the dialogue and clicking on the relevant buttons, other than the minigames (although they can be confusing and repetitive). The game can also be quite overtly sexual, which isn’t entirely surprising when dealing with vampires. But I imagine this could be uncomfortable for some players, so maybe avoid if that isn’t your thing.

Overall, I had a great time playing Vampire Therapist. The concept is really interesting and different and I think they pulled it off really well.



4/5

NPC Spotlight

This issue’s star non-player character is Abigail from Stardew Valley! Here’s why we think she deserves the attention

With her purple hair, interest in the occult and alternative lifestyle, Abigail is definitely one of the coolest and most intriguing characters in the game.

She’s one of the 12 dateable characters, though some players may be put off persuading her romantically because she seems to have an interest in Sebastian. But she’s actually a great character to date. She owns a sword (and protects you with it in one of the unlockable scenes), she plays video games with you and she can play the flute. What more could you want in a partner?

But one of the best things about Abigail originated through a coding error — she eats rocks. When you hand her a gem that’s one of her Likes, such as a quartz, she’ll say “hey, how’d you know I was hungry? This looks delicious!” This reaction was only meant to happen if you handed her food, but fans found it so funny that developer ConcernedApe didn’t fix it. Even though it was originally a mistake, it’s become an endearing part of her personality that makes her even more fun to interact with.



Image credit: ConcernedApe



Professor Layton and the Curious Village was the first game in the franchise

Professor Layton's charm is no puzzle

In this issue's Replay column, Phoebe Leonard explains why she loves the Professor Layton series ahead of upcoming Professor Layton and The New World of Steam

For many people, their favourite video game is more than just a way to pass the time – it's a world they can escape into, full of characters that feel more like friends than pixels on a screen. For me, this isn't one singular game, but a series: the Professor Layton games.

If you don't know, the Professor Layton franchise is a set of puzzle adventure games, originally released for Nintendo DS and 3DS. The main character is Hershel Layton, a professor of archaeology who is world-renowned for his mystery solving skills. The games follow him and his sidekick Luke Triton (among others) as they work to solve various mysteries that are brought to their attention. The art style is cosy and welcoming, filled with warm colours and the music is fun with a jaunty mix of piano and violin.

But aside from the actual gameplay itself, there are some more personal reasons I love this series. The first one is nostalgia because I played it as a child. My parents bought the first two games for my brother and me on Ebay and my earliest memories of them are from family holidays to Cornwall. I would sit on the caravan sofa in the early mornings when my parents hadn't woken up yet, immersed in the fictional world. And if I found a puzzle that was too difficult to solve by myself, my dad would come to the rescue and help me find the solution.

I think this nostalgia is why I replayed the first two games so much for years. But there's only so many times you can solve the same puzzles, so when I found out there were more games, I made it my mission to get them. I spent years looking through second-hand shops like CeX, scanning the shelves in

the hope I'd find one I didn't already have.

I was looking for the last prequel, Professor Layton and the Azran Legacy, when the first lockdown hit in March 2020, forcing us all inside and disrupting my first year of A-Levels. To try to cheer us up, my parents bought us each a game to help us pass the time, and of course my choice was Professor Layton.

Despite not being my favourite game in the franchise, Azran Legacy is so important to me because it gave me something to focus on during that strange time. Working my way through a Professor Layton game brought me a sense of comfort and reminder of my childhood that I didn't realise I needed. The music and art immediately transported me back to that world and to a much easier time in life, before things felt so scary and serious. This ability to take me away from my worries feels so special and it's something I've not encountered in quite the same way in other games, probably because of the sentimental nature of childhood memories.

I've continued to replay the DS games over the last few years and they've never lost their charm, but I've always wished there was more to the story. So, it's only natural that I was incredibly excited when the next game, Professor Layton and The New World of Steam, for the Nintendo Switch, was announced in February 2023.

It's been an agonising two years of waiting but I'm hoping this means that Level 5 and Nintendo are making the game the best it can be. I'll be buying it as soon as it's released. And although I'm nervous that it won't be as good as the original six games, I don't think anything could ruin my deep love for this series.

