

Video Games for Calm and Introspection: A Brief (and Calm) Examination of *Stillgames*

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Introduction

Video games are often regarded as a noisy medium, overwhelming players with aggressive stimuli. This view comes from a clear source: the aesthetic of noise and excess in video games is rooted in their fundamental characteristics, particularly the combination of ergodicity and audiovisuality. Indeed, in video games, the influence of Batman outweighs that of Bergman. Yet alongside this tradition, a distinct countercurrent has emerged—reflective games that cultivate silence and introspection. I propose to call this trend

stillgames, situating it within a broader constellation of phenomena already discussed in game studies. These include Sonia Fizek's use of interpassivity in her analysis of *idle games*,¹ as well as the aesthetics of "safety, abundance, and softness"² that define *cozy games*. This article explores key dimensions of *stillgames*. The first section outlines their historical and media foundations, while the second offers close readings of representative video games that exemplify this emerging trend.

Stillgames: Context and Terminological Framework

My use of the term *stillgames* is motivated by three considerations. First, it functions as a pun on the notion of being still—calm, quiet, and not moving—thereby evoking tranquility, balance, and harmony as the defining qualities of the video games it describes. Second, it serves as a clear declaration that, although the phenomenon under discussion occupies the periphery of the video game universe rather than its center, these works are *still* games. In this respect, the category enters into a subtle yet thought-provoking dialogue with the notion of *notgames*,³ which I address later in this article. Third, the concept of *stillgames* draws inspiration from Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis's art installation *Still Standing*, which offers a critical reflection on contemporary culture and its aesthetics of excess and interactivity. In their article tellingly titled "Inter-inactivity," Nadeau and Lewis observed that "[w]ithin the larger popular culture it can be difficult to find moments of quiet, or periods of stillness, that allow one to process and contemplate all of the information received during the course of a day."⁴ *Still Standing* can be seen as a conceptual response to this condition, emphasizing the need for a return to more reflective—quiet, focused, and mindful—forms of participation in culture. Two decades after the article's publication, Nadeau and Lewis's call for inter-inactivity appears even more timely.

Nadeau and Lewis's call for inter-inactivity appears strikingly consistent with Fizek's earlier reflection,⁵ which employs the concept of "interpassivity"—borrowed from Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek—to analyze *idle games*. *Idle games* progress, slowly but surely, even when the player is not actively playing the game. Their primary appeal lies in observing the growth of parameters and values, while making optimization decisions—such as investing, upgrading, or automating processes—to accelerate growth.⁶ Fizek demonstrates that, in the case of

¹ Sonia Fizek, "Interpassivity and the Joy of Delegated Play in Idle Games", *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 3 (2018).

² Tanya X. Short et al., "Cozy Games", *Lostgarden*, 24 Jan. 2018, <https://lostgarden.home.blog/2018/01/24/cozy-games/>.

³ Auriea Harvey, Michael Samyn, "Over Games", *Tale of Tales*, 2010, <https://tale-of-tales.com/tales/OverGames.html>.

⁴ Bruno Nadeau, Jason Lewis, "Inter-inactivity", *Digital Arts and Culture Conference*, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2005, http://www.obxlabs.net/obx_docs/inter-inactivity.

⁵ Fizek.

⁶ Justin Buergi thus explains the essence of idle games (also called clicker games and incremental games): "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," while "the absence of direct engagement [can] be transformed into a nuanced interplay involving the management of impatience and strategies for optimization" (Justin Buergi, "Idle Games: A Cozy Genre Turned Exploitative", *Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 1 [2024]: 74).

such productions—video games that, in effect, play themselves—the traditional notions of interactivity and agency prove insufficient.

Stillgames should be analyzed within a **syncretic academic framework**. Indeed, video games are characterized by a continually expanding diversity of themes, gameplay types, mechanics, platforms, and narrative forms. Over time, this syncretism has become increasingly pervasive, with new varieties and genres systematically emerging. Several factors contribute to this development. On the one hand, it reflects **the natural evolution of a medium that still has a relatively short history**. On the other hand, this phenomenon must be situated within the wider context of contemporary cultural manifestations, such as:

- **remix culture** defined as “a global activity consisting of the creative and efficient exchange of information made possible by digital technologies;”⁷
- **media convergence** defined by Henry Jenkins as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences;”⁸
- **glocalization**, which, in Victor Roudometof’s contemporary understanding, “integrates into a single formulation processes of globalization and localization;”⁹
- **mash-up culture**, defined as activities that “put together different information, media, or objects without changing their original source of information (...). In other words, mashups follow a logic that is additive or accumulative in that they combine and collect material and immaterial goods and aggregate them into either manifested design objects or open-ended re-combinatory and interactive information sources on the Web;”¹⁰
- and the “**hybridization of contemporary life**,”¹¹ which Manuel Castells notices in the growing integration of various, also digital, forms of communication.

Thirdly, although the aesthetics of silence, minimalism, and contemplation align with broader trends in contemporary digital culture, stillgames **should be discussed primarily within the context of gaming culture**. Scholars such as Mia Consalvo,¹² T.L. Taylor,¹³ and

⁷ Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Wien, New York: Springer, 2012), 65.

⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

⁹ Victor Roudometof, *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

¹⁰ *Mashup Cultures*, ed. Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss (Wien, New York: Springer, 2010), 9.

¹¹ Manuel Castells, “Preface to the 2010 Edition of *The Rise of the Network Society*”, in: Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xxix.

¹² Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

¹³ T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

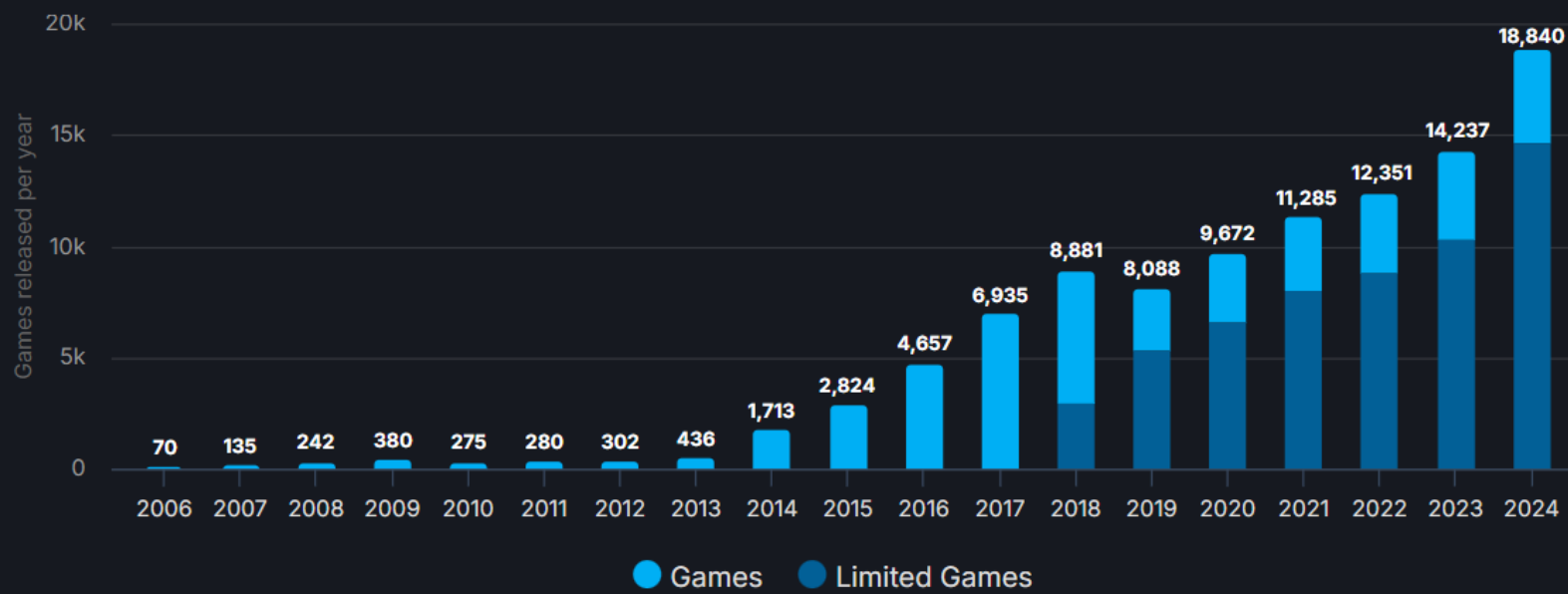
Adrienne Shaw¹⁴ emphasize that video games do not exist in a formal vacuum; rather, they operate within networks of practices, discourses, and social contexts. Increasingly, players seek something else than competition and adrenaline, which reflects a shift in the gaming consumer profile: the average age of gamers in the United States is now 36, and more than a quarter are over 50, playing regularly for relaxation and mental stimulation (ESA 2025; *The Guardian* 2025). On platforms like Steam, communities have formed around emerging *cozy games* as well as another leisurely genre, *walking simulators*.¹⁵ On itch.io, respectively, the popularity of experimental titles that emphasize contemplation and subtle emotions is evident. These works are often created by small collectives or solo developers who treat games as a medium of artistic expression. *Stillgames* should therefore be understood as a response to the maturation of gaming culture: a shift in audience expectations toward titles that offer reflection, affective engagement, and a slower presence within the game world. This distinguishes them from trends centered on comfort or narrative abundance.

Stillgames are not merely an aesthetic choice but also a product of the medium's broader transformation: the rise of digital distribution, the accessibility of creative tools such as Unity and Twine, and—perhaps most significantly—the shifting social profiles of gaming audiences. Media discourse surrounding titles like *Journey*, *Flower*, and *Kind Words* illustrates how categories of tranquility and reflectiveness are actively reinterpreted by players themselves. In forums and reviews, these games are frequently described as a form of “relaxation after work” or as “alternatives to stressful games.” Consequently, *stillgames* should be understood not simply as expressions of general aesthetic trends, but as practices deeply embedded in gaming culture—practices through which players and creators negotiate the meanings of entertainment, relaxation, and reflection within the medium.

Finally, the growing syncretization of games can be traced to the systematic rise in the number of titles released each year. On Steam—the leading distribution platform for PC games—18,840 new titles were launched globally in 2024. This translates to more than one new release every half hour, marking a 32% increase over the previous year, itself a record-breaking benchmark. As the chart below illustrates, this sustained growth has intensified competition and market saturation. In response, an increasing number of developers adopt strategies designed to distinguish their products from competitors, echoing Trout's maxim: “differentiate or die.”

¹⁴Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

¹⁵In this context, it is worth mentioning the brilliant book *Wandering Games*, in which the author classifies walking simulators as part of a broader category of games about wandering. This framing extends the reflection on “walking in games” beyond a mere generic category, interpreting wandering as a key to understanding a distinctive form of gameplay—one grounded in contemplation, exploration, and being in the world, see: Melissa Kagen, *Wandering Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022). In Poland, Marcin Chojnacki addresses similar issues, see: Marcin M. Chojnacki, “Flâneur w piaskownicy: O doświadczeniu nawigowalnej przestrzeni w grach komputerowych” [*Flâneur in the Sandbox: The Experience of Navigable Space in Computer Games*], *Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 1 (2014) and Marcin M. Chojnacki, “Gracz-turysta: Przewodniki po grach i kształtowanie doświadczenia użytkownika” [*The Gamer Tourist: Game Guides and User Experience Development*], *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication* 33 (2023).



Screenshot from SteamDB (<https://steamdb.info/stats/releases/>) illustrating the number of games released on Steam each year.

When the syncretization of contemporary video games is considered, it becomes evident that *stillgames* should not be regarded as a genre defined within rigid frameworks. Instead, it is more productive to approach *stillgames* as a tendency—one whose features may be found with varying intensity in different titles and at distinct moments in the medium’s history. The most salient characteristics of *stillgames* can be summarized as follows:

1. **Minimalist gameplay** – *Stillgames* typically rely on simple gameplay, offering players a limited range of interactions that avoid unnecessary complexity.
2. **Accessible controls** – Regardless of genre or theme, controls are designed to accommodate less experienced players. They emphasize intuitiveness and naturalness, requiring little to no elaborate instruction or onboarding.
3. **Slow progression** – *Stillgames* intentionally moderate gameplay. Transformations within the gaming universe or in the player’s state unfold gradually, without abrupt accelerations, difficulty spikes, or high-intensity action sequences.
4. **Minimal or absent meta-game objectives** – These games seldom impose explicit goals such as point accumulation or achievement milestones. Instead, they emphasize immersion in the present moment, encouraging exploration, contemplation, and personal interpretation of the activity.
5. **Rejection of failure-based structures** – *Stillgames* dispense with traditional mechanics centered on the risk of failure. They minimize or entirely avoid negative feedback, including at the level of the graphic interface.
6. **Observation and contemplation as interaction** – The central “action” in *stillgames* lies in watching, listening, and bearing witness—a form of co-presence rather than dynamic

engagement. Participation is often subtle, involving quiet attunement to the world's gradual transformations.¹⁶

7. **Open, spacious environments** – *Stillgames* frequently feature expansive, open, and empty settings. Their spatial design fosters reflection, deliberately avoiding overstimulation.
8. **Subdued audiovisuals** – Visual and auditory cues are restrained, eschewing sharp contrasts or highly stimulating effects.
9. **Reflective and calm music** – Soundscapes often draw on ambient, contemplative, or meditative traditions. Ritual bells and instruments from Japanese Zen music—such as the shakuhachi flute—are often used to evoke a sense of tranquility and introspection.
10. **Emotional neutrality and gentleness** – *Stillgames* deliberately avoid evoking intense emotions such as fear, stress, or aggression. Instead, they cultivate atmospheres of peace, melancholy, and contemplation.
11. **Reduction of non-diegetic elements** – Graphical user interfaces are minimized or rendered invisible. When present, they remain discreet, stylized, or seamlessly integrated into diegetic elements of the game world.
12. **Minimalist verbal narrative** – *Stillgames* often dispense with verbal storytelling or present it in an extremely pared-down form. Narratives unfold through symbols, environmental cues, and rhythm rather than through words.
13. **Meditative, spiritual, or introspective themes** – *Stillgames* often evoke experiences of meditation, spirituality, or self-reflection. These themes may be addressed directly or emerge implicitly through settings and mechanics that invite interpretation along these lines.
14. **Understatement** – Narrative framing is frequently minimal, with little explicit explanation of the gameplay situation. Questions such as whose perspective is adopted, or where and when the action unfolds, are left deliberately open.

Several of the characteristics outlined above intersect with those of *cozy games*. As Kelly Boudreau notes, *cozy games* are distinguished by a gentle aesthetic, ambient audio, a peaceful atmosphere shaped by music and sound, and low-risk gameplay. Both *cozy games* and

¹⁶In this respect, stillgames align closely with Merlin Seller's sensing sims, in which conventional action yields to contemplative experience. Seller highlights the importance of the "feeling" of space in such games—a slow, affective exploration of atmospheres often facilitated through unconventional perceptual tools. The concept of stillgames develops along a similar trajectory, but places particular emphasis on silence, pause, and introspection. In these moments, the game no longer functions as a system oriented toward "optimal action;" instead, it becomes a medium for affective engagement and self-reflection. See: Merlin Seller, "Sensing Sims: Atmospheres, Aesthetics and the Cyborg Player", in: *Materializing Digital Futures: Touch, Movement, Sound and Vision*, ed. Toija Cinque, Jordan Beth Vincent (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

stillgames thus operate within a shared framework of tranquility, absence of pressure, and aesthetic softness. However, they diverge significantly in their underlying **aims and cultural functions**. Differences can be observed in the use of visual and affective codes: *cozy games* emphasize softness and abundance, while *stillgames* focus on minimalism. The affective dimension of the experience also differs, with *cozy games* fostering comfort and *stillgames* encouraging contemplation. Thematic distinctions are equally evident: *cozy games* are often grounded in everyday practices of care,¹⁷ social relationships, and everyday rituals (such as cooking, friendships, and gardening), whereas *stillgames* tend to draw inspiration from spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic traditions (including meditation, contemplation, and the sublime).

The above list of fourteen features is not a set of conditions that a game must satisfy to be classified as a *stillgame*. Rather, it represents recurring characteristics within a distinct trend, three examples of which I discuss below.

Flow and flow

Stillgames are not merely the product of the recent surge in popularity and diversity within the gaming industry. Titles that align with the *stillgame* trend appeared much earlier. A notable precursor to this phenomenon is *Flow* (2006), created by Jenova Chen and the independent studio Thatgamecompany. The video game can be described as a minimalist simulation of existence and evolution: the player inhabits an undefined organic entity—an ephemeral microorganism—that moves through successive layers of an aquatic environment. Interaction with other organisms, primarily through their absorption, drives the gradual evolution of the creature controlled by the player.

Progress is not central in *Flow*; it functions more as a secondary gameplay element. Other features take precedence. Most notably, the interaction system is deliberately not stressful: *Flow* imposes no time limits, avoids conventionally defined enemies, and makes failure impossible. In doing so, the developers dismantled traditional goal-and-reward structures and instead crafted an open-ended experience oriented toward immersion.

Controls are a central element of this experience, carefully designed to maximize fluidity. The player-controlled organism responds to input with gentle, intuitive motions, making it feel easy and smooth. Movement unfolds at a rhythm set by the player, while the aquatic environment amplifies the feeling of presence and invites contemplation.

On an aesthetic level, *Flow* employs visual and auditory features characteristic of meditative experiences—an ambient soundtrack, subtle and delicate animation, and subdued color schemes (at least throughout most of the gameplay). Aggressive or unexpected sensory

¹⁷It is worth recalling the work of Waszkiewicz and Tymińska, who interpret “care” in the context of cozy games not merely as an aesthetic category, but also as a form of resistance and a cultural practice of social engagement (Agata Waszkiewicz, Marta Tymińska, “Cozy Games and Resistance Through Care”, *Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 1 [2024]).



Screenshot from Flow (2006). The player-controlled organism appears at the center, surrounded by smaller consumable creatures

stimuli are, for the most part, absent. The game neither imposes a specific pace nor articulates an explicit goal. Its implied objective arises solely from affordances: the natural trajectory of play suggests the expansion and evolution of the player-controlled entity. Yet nothing compels the player to pursue this direction, nor is any reward offered for doing so (unless reaching the end credits is considered one). Instead, the game opens a space for introspection and invites an interpretation in which its meaning lies not in achieving a specific outcome, but in the act of *being* itself—the contemplative observation of the entity and its ongoing transformation.

The above interpretations are further reinforced by the game's title: *Flow* alludes to the psychological concept of "flow" developed by the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—"the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter."¹⁸ Csikszentmihalyi built his theory of "optimal experience" on this foundation, describing a particular configuration of external conditions and internal states that enables individuals to achieve both maximum effectiveness and a profound sense of satisfaction.

¹⁸ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 3.



Screenshot from *ABZÛ* (2016) depicting the protagonist from a distance to emphasize the vastness of the navigable space. During core gameplay, no graphical user interface elements appear on screen, eliminating potential visual noise

The concept of flow “has proven highly valuable to psychologists examining happiness, life satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation; to sociologists, who regard it as the antithesis of anomie and alienation; and to anthropologists, who explore it in relation to collective joy and ritual practices.”¹⁹ In psychology, the concept of flow is associated with a state of calm, sometimes even akin to meditation: “in today’s world—marked by rapid pace, information overload, and multitasking—the state of flow offers an alternative.”²⁰ In his publicly available master’s thesis, Jenova Chen, the lead designer of *Flow*, explores Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow in relation to video games and introduces his own framework for designing games that evoke this state.²¹ He also outlines a methodology of *Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment* (DDA),

¹⁹ Anna Porczyńska-Ciszewska, *Cechy osobowości a doświadczanie szczęścia i poczucie sensu życia* [Personality Traits, Happiness, and the Meaning in Life] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), 44.

²⁰ Tomasz Kozłowski, “Między przepływem a pop-intymnością: Społeczeństwo wysokich prędkości i ucieczka w siebie” [Between Flow and Pop Intimacy: High-Speed Society and the Escape into Oneself], *Tematy z Szewskiej* [Themes from Szewska Street] 1 (2015): 80.

²¹ It is worth noting that, although the concept of flow is regarded as a cornerstone of contemporary game design, it has also become a subject of critical debate; see, in particular, Braxton Soderman, *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

which he implemented in *Flow*.²² Chen's game thus operates on multiple levels: it is a widely acclaimed independent title, a practical research and design experiment, and a compelling example of the gaming trend under discussion.

ABZÛ and immersion

The second *stillgame* I wish to analyze in detail is *ABZÛ*, a title that shares many aesthetic and gameplay similarities with *Flow*. Its action unfolds primarily within an aquatic environment. The player assumes the role of a humanoid scuba diver who explores the underwater world, interacting with different objects and observing various forms of marine life. A distinctive feature of the game is its freely rotating camera. By default, when the diver is in open space, the camera is positioned at a considerable distance from the character, emphasizing the vastness of the ocean and evoking a sense of the sublime.

The soundtrack is shaped by water—gentle splashes and the rhythmic movement of waves. The music remains calm and understated, led by soft instrumental compositions. Only in rare moments of implied danger does the atmosphere change, though it never culminates in death or defeat.

Navigating the underwater world—so different from the terrestrial environment—encourages playful interaction with the surroundings. Schools of fish invite the player to swim among them, parting gracefully as the character passes through them. The environment's design—featuring underwater corridors, rock arches, and hidden passages—fosters exploration and elevates presence into a lived experience that compels continued engagement.

ABZÛ's diegesis is entirely devoid of text—words appear only in metasystemic functions, for example in the minimalist interface. The control scheme itself is also simple. The player needs to navigate a three-dimensional space and use a single interaction button when approaching a specific object.

Although the game's theme—on the *surface*—is ocean exploration, deeper *immersion* invites introspection, mindful engagement with the world, and contemplation of existence. The most striking example of this is the meditation function: the player needs to find designated spot. When they interact with it, the character assumes a meditative pose, and the camera shifts away from them to follow the freely moving underwater creatures. This reversal of perspective is significant—it redirects attention from the player-controlled figure to the surrounding world, with its calm, silent rhythms. In doing so, it suspends agency and replaces it with an invitation to contemplation.

²²See: Jenova Chen, *Flow in Games* (M.A. Thesis, University of Southern California, 2006), 16–17.



Screenshot from ABZÛ (2016). The character begins meditation on an underwater statue

A medium of spiritual contemplation

Another—both intriguing and radical—example of a *stillgame* is the now somewhat forgotten project *Cathedral-in-the-Clouds*, developed by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, the founders of the Tale of Tales studio. This artistic endeavor, perhaps the most ambitious of all Harvey and Samyn’s works, departs from the conventional notion of a “video game” and moves toward what might be described as an interactive meditation grounded in game poetics. *Cathedral-in-the-Clouds* is conceived as “a multisensory, interactive exploration of the great cathedrals of Europe.”²³ It consists of semi-static interactive scenes—“digital dioramas,” as the creators describe them—drawing inspiration from medieval and Renaissance Christian art. Each diorama offers a unique spatial experience, structured around themes of prayer, contemplation, penance, and spiritual solitude. Gameplay is deliberately minimalist, accompanied by a monumental, sacred, and melancholic atmosphere that relies heavily on light, spatial composition, and religious symbolism.

Technically, the project was never realized in its original form, which envisioned offering players an expansive environment—the titular cathedral—composed of multiple modules (altars, chapels) through which they could freely navigate. Instead, selected fragments were released as standalone VR or desktop applications, distributed either free of charge or for a fee. Among these is *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration*, which immerses the user in the titular chapel. According to the description on the project’s website, “[t]he structure of *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* is based on Hildegard’s visions of the cosmos. In these,

²³ Marie-Laure Ryan, Giuliana Fenech, “The CounterText Interview: Marie-Laure Ryan”, CounterText 2 (2016): 276.

she would see a geocentric universe embraced by the love of God and animated by the winds of faith and trust. In the *Viriditas Chapel*, this embrace is performed by the Holy Virgin. We find the sphere of fire in the two outer columns and the sphere of water in the inner columns. The central altar piece represents the earth.”²⁴

Unlike in earlier *stillgames*, text plays a central role in shaping the experience. Beneath the player’s feet appears an English translation of *O Viridissima Virga*—a medieval hymn that celebrates the Virgin Mary composed by Saint Hildegard of Bingen. This inscription provides a distinctive interpretive framework for the visualizations encountered by the player. Its placement is a striking rhetorical gesture: to read it, the player must lean forward, effectively bowing before the altar. Interaction within *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* is deliberately constrained to two gestures—bowing and kneeling before the altar. The player uses a VR application, which means these actions must be carried out physically, enacted directly through the body. The reduction of interactive possibilities, combined with the mystical, visionary quality of the altar’s animation and the minimalist form of the entire experience—lasting only a few minutes—renders *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* legible as a simulation of religious practice, a digital VR space designed for spiritual contemplation.

²⁴The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration, <https://cathedral-in-the-clouds.net/viriditas/index.html>.

Screenshot from *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* featured on the project’s Steam page.



Conclusion

Ambitious titles—those that transcend the conventional boundaries of the medium and engage with philosophical, artistic, or otherwise challenging themes—have often been discussed in game studies and practice. The creators of *Cathedral-in-the-Clouds* likewise engaged with this discourse. In their explorations of the potential of digital entertainment and art, they frequently invoked the term *notgames*. They emphasize that it “is a method of design, a challenge to designers and artists” and as such “[i]t’s about broadening the spectrum, not narrowing it down.”²⁵ This proposal functioned primarily as a manifesto—a declaration by its creators that sought to articulate and name a particular design trend. Its goal was to encourage the creation of works that aspire to “incorporate many interactive components and align with the broader tradition of digital entertainment, yet at the same time they reject the conventional aspects of video games—such as competition, challenge, and the very possibility of winning or losing.”²⁶

Certainly, many *stillgames* can also be classified as *notgames*. Yet while the two categories may share common elements—particularly in their departure from conventional gameplay—their orientations differ fundamentally. *Notgames* function primarily as a design philosophy: an approach that invites creators to challenge the traditional boundaries of video games and to explore new modes of expression. *Notgames* are, in essence, a call to experiment with interactive media in order to expand its creative and reflective potential. *Stillgames*, by contrast, constitute a descriptive category. They refer to existing works distinguished by specific qualities such as broadly defined minimalism, a serene aesthetic, and themes that evoke meditative or contemplative experiences. At the same time, some *notgames* may employ intense and expressive means; likewise, *stillgames* do not necessarily reduce gameplay to its bare minimum. The very term *stillgames* nevertheless introduces two assumptions absent from the postulates surrounding *notgames*. First, testing and stretching the limits of the medium’s possibilities does not automatically entail transcending them (*stillgames* are still games). Second, the category presupposes that an aesthetics of silence is an important one. This latter point is particularly significant, given the extent to which *stillgames* diverge from the stereotypical video games seen as a medium of audiovisual excess.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

²⁵Harvey, Samyn.

²⁶Paweł Schreiber, “Eksperymentalne komputerowe gry tekstowe lat 90. a ruch notgames” [Experimental Text-Based Computer Games of the 1990s and the NotGames Movement], *Homo Ludens* 1 (2014): 132.

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KEYWORDS

video games

c a l m n e s s

ABSTRACT:

This article discusses *stillgames*, that is video games designed around experiences of stillness, contemplation, and silence, in opposition to the dominant aesthetics of excess, dynamics, and competition. Characteristic features of this trend are analyzed, such as minimalist gameplay, subdued audiovisuals, observation-based interactions, and a rejection of a gameplay structure based on the risk of failure. *Stillgames* are placed within the broader context of game studies (particularly in relation to *cozy games*, *idle games*, and gaming culture), as well as within the broader context of the medium's history. Their unique nature and cultural significance are thus both established and emphasized.

introspection

close reading

game studies

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