

**Samuel Poirier-Poulin\***

# “Drown Your Troubles in Coffee”: Place, Heterotopia, and Immersion in the *Coffee Talk* Series

## *A b s t r a c t*

This article contributes to the growing body of research on space, place, and immersion in video games and offers an analysis of placeness in *Coffee Talk* (Toge Productions, 2020) and *Coffee Talk Episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly* (Toge Productions, 2023). Building on the work of Michel Foucault (1967/2008), this article begins by analyzing the coffee shop of this series as a heterotopia that allows the game characters and the player to find a form of comfort. Then, it examines the series in light of theories of immersion and pays particular attention to the place where the author played the two games – his bed – and also describes it as a heterotopia. This paper shows the usefulness of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia to understand placeness and coziness in video games, and the relevance of taking into account the physical space of play when we conduct a textual analysis.

**Keywords:** place, space, heterotopia, immersion, cozy games, bed, textual analysis, *Coffee Talk*

---

\* Université de Montréal, e-mail: [samuel.poirier.poulin@gmail.com](mailto:samuel.poirier.poulin@gmail.com)

## Introduction

The distinction between space and place has been the source of fruitful discussions in human geography since the 1970s. In his foundational book *Place: An Introduction*, Tim Cresswell (2015) defines places as “spaces which people have made meaningful . . . [and] are attached to in one way or another” (p. 12). For Cresswell, place is more concrete than space. “When we speak of space we tend to think of outer-space or the spaces of geometry,” he writes. “Spaces have areas and volumes. Places have space between them” (Cresswell, 2015, p. 15). Nevertheless, space and place are not mutually exclusive – a location can be both a space for someone and a place for someone else – and the relationship between the two is fluid. Cresswell draws on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), who explains that a space can become a place as we familiarize ourselves with it and imbue it with value (p. 6). The concepts of space and place truly take on their full meaning when compared to each other: “From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). Cresswell also builds on the work of John Agnew (1987, p. 28), who notes that three criteria are essential to the creation of a place: (1) a location, identifiable through geographical coordinates; (2) a locale, i.e., the physical, material setting of the space, its concrete form (defined by walls, windows, and a door in the case of a room); and (3) a sense of place, i.e., the subjective and affective attachment to a certain place and the feeling of knowing what it is like to be in this place (Cresswell, 2015, pp. 12–14).

In game studies, the notion of space has gained considerable attention since the early 2000s and has notably been explored through the lens of design and architecture (Nitsche, 2008; Totten, 2014; Wolf, 2001), storytelling (Domsch, 2019; Jenkins, 2004), gender studies, domestic labour, and domestic culture (Flynn, 2003; Harvey, 2015; Nooney, 2013), postcolonial studies (Breger, 2008; Mukherjee, 2015; Murray, 2017), and queer theory (Ruberg, 2020; Yu, 2023). In contrast, research with an emphasis on the notion of place is fairly recent. Christopher Goetz (2012) has analyzed the tether fantasy in *Terraria* (Re-Logic, 2011) and *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), arguing that the player experiences pleasure from exploring new and hostile spaces, and then returning to a safe place – their home base – where they can withdraw from danger. Along the same lines, Daniel Vella (2019) has written about feelings of dwelling and being-at-home in *Minecraft* and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo EAD, 2012), two games that allow the player to build their own “place” and that emphasize the binary opposition “inside/outside.” Jessica Robinson and Nicholas Bowman (2022) have examined how players experience *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019), a version of *World of Warcraft* that recreates the game as it was in 2006 (with some minor modifications). They have found that social experiences, notably the sense of belonging to a community, contribute to feelings of nostalgia and a sense of place in the world of Azeroth. Lastly, Andrea

Andiloro (2022) has examined how atmosphere contributes to a sense of place in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) through patterns of light, colour, texture, and sound, and through social interaction and movement. As he explains, “whenever we ‘play a game’ we are not just engaging in a ludic activity, we are also visiting and temporarily inhabiting places presenting an atmosphere synaesthetically perceived by the felt-body” (Andiloro, 2022, p. 219).

This article contributes to the growing body of research on space, place, and immersion in video games and offers an analysis of placeness in *Coffee Talk*, a series of visual novels developed by Indonesian independent studio Toge Productions. The series consists of two games – *Coffee Talk* (2020) and *Coffee Talk Episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly* (2023)<sup>1</sup> – that both put the player in the shoes of a barista who works in a coffee shop open in the evenings. The series is visually inspired by pixel art and anime from the 1990s, and incorporates slow, chillhop background music. The story is set in 2020 or 2023 (depending on the game) in a fantasy version of Seattle where humans, orcs, banshees, werewolves, and other creatures coexist. The story of each game takes place over the course of two weeks, and each day is presented as a vignette during which different characters come to Coffee Talk, the in-game coffee shop, to take a hot drink and chat (see Figure 1 and 2). The series addresses themes such as interracial relationships, war trauma and healing, the challenges of parenting, and the obstacles faced by creative workers. Interestingly, Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) observes that place and narrative are inherently connected. She argues that locations gain their status of place through the stories people tell about them, which allow us to develop affective connections with these locations and distinguish them from their surrounding space (p. 86). The simple fact that *Coffee Talk* tells the story of a coffee shop and its customers contributes greatly to making Coffee Talk a place for the player. In addition, the use of a proper name to refer to this location is a strong way to create a sense of place (Ryan, 2015, p. 89).

*Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are described as “talking simulators” on their respective Steam pages (n.d.), but it would be more accurate to describe these games as “listening simulators”<sup>2</sup> since the player character does not speak much and the player spends most of the game listening to the daily conversations of a few regular customers, who sit at the counter near the barista. In addition, unlike many other visual novels, the games do not contain dialogue trees, and the player never needs to choose their character’s answer or action from a series of options. Although *Coffee Talk 1* and *2*

---

<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion between the name of the series and the name of each game, I will write *Coffee Talk* to refer to the entire series, and *Coffee Talk 1* and *Coffee Talk 2* to respectively refer to the first and second games. I will write Coffee Talk (without italics) to refer to the in-game coffee shop.

<sup>2</sup> I owe this term to Carl Therrien, who used it in his graduate seminar on cinema, video games, and interactive fiction (JEU6002) in the winter of 2022 to describe *Coffee Talk 1*.

are primarily text-based games, the player must sometimes prepare hot drinks for the customers by combining three ingredients. Serving the right drink to a character based on their order or their mood slightly influences the conversations and the character's story arc and allows the player to unlock different endings. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are available on PC, home consoles, and handheld consoles, but for this paper, I will draw specifically on my gaming experience on the Nintendo Switch.



**Figure 1-2.** The coffee shop of *Coffee Talk*. Top picture: Myrtle (left) and Aqua (right) in *Coffee Talk 1*. Bottom picture: Lucas (left), Jorji (middle), and Hyde (right) in *Coffee Talk 2*. Screenshots by the author.

Building on the work of Michel Foucault (1967/2008), this article begins by analyzing the coffee shop of *Coffee Talk* as a heterotopia (a concept I define below) that allows the game characters and the player to find a form of comfort. Then, it examines the series in light of theories of immersion and pays particular attention to the place where I played the two games – my bed – and also describes it as a heterotopia. I finally conclude by briefly highlighting how *Coffee Talk* encourages us to think about alternative ways of designing video games and how it can be used for self-care. This paper ultimately shows the usefulness of Foucault's concept of heterotopia to understand placeness and coziness in video games, and the relevance of taking into account the physical space of play when we conduct a textual analysis. Throughout this article, I keep in mind the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1986), who sees reading as "a transactional process that goes on between a particular reader and a particular text at a particular time, and under particular circumstances" (p. 123). I believe that a similar remark could be made about gaming and the importance of taking into consideration the circumstances surrounding play.

### Coffee Talk as a heterotopic place

In his text "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault (1967/2008) defines heterotopias as concrete places that foster imagination and are separated from other places and spaces. Heterotopias are sites "that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations designated, mirrored, or reflected by them" (pp. 16–17). For Foucault, heterotopias are places that are part of society, but which are also "a sort of counter-emplacements," "a kind of places that are outside of all places, even though they are actually localizable" (p. 17). Heterotopias differ from utopias, which are idealized versions of society, "emplacements with no real place," but Foucault specifies that heterotopias can be seen as "a sort of effectively realized utopias" (p. 17). For him, heterotopias are places like the cemetery, the psychiatric hospital, the prison, the garden, the museum, the library, and the ship. Heterotopias are therefore real approximations of utopias, or parallel places where we put individuals who are socially perceived as undesirable in order to make utopia possible in the rest of society.

Since the publication of Foucault's (1967/2008) text, a few researchers have examined the café and the coffeehouse as heterotopias. Enrico Bolzoni (2013), for example, has analyzed the café in the works of Patrick Modiano and Guy Debord as "a counter-site in the ultra-organized space of contemporary Paris, a discontinuous and subversive, but socially defined, spatiality" (pp. 140–141). According to him, Modiano and Debord's works encourage contemporary readers and spectators to become aware of the emptiness and devalued image of modern cafés and to realize

that new places with roles closer to the historical roles of cafés must be created. Kevin Hetherington (1997, pp. 14–15) and Uğur Kömeçoğlu (2005) have respectively described the coffeehouses of the Palais-Royal in late 18th-century France and 16th- and 17th-century Istanbul as heterotopias because of their multiple functions: they were notably a place for reading, gambling, prostitution, theatre, and for talking about politics. Hetherington and Kömeçoğlu's analyses are in line with the idea that certain places are heterotopic because of their heterogeneity and their "power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1967/2008, p. 19).

In their analysis of *Coffee Talk 1*, Agata Waszkiewicz (2022) briefly mentions that the game's coffee shop could be seen as a "third place"<sup>3</sup> (p. 97), a concept proposed by Ray Oldenburg (1999), to describe social environments that are distinct from the home (the first place) and from the workplace (the second place). According to Oldenburg, third places are "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" (p. 16). While this idea is representative of the experience of *Coffee Talk*, the work of Foucault (1967/2008) allows me to push this reflection further and to show that *Coffee Talk* is a particular third place: a third place that is heterotopic. *Coffee Talk* is introduced to the player as a unique place within a bustling Seattle. Each game begins with a prologue that highlights the contradictory feelings the city evokes – a mix of dreams, loneliness, and disillusion:

Seattle – 2020 / A city filled with dreams and madness. / A time when the great war between races is but a footnote in history. / A time when anyone can dream of being whatever they want to be... / And have those dreams crushed before they can even be discussed. / But still, it is a place and time where anything can happen (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2020).

Seattle – 2023 / A city of enduring loneliness. / A place where the dreamers, the realists, and the weary... / ... are striving to thrive, and not just to survive. / It is a time when society is reevaluating what it means to be alive. / It is a moment when history is questioned and traditions are challenged (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2023).

Each prologue ends by highlighting the importance of *Coffee Talk* – the comfort it provides to its customers, which contrasts with the harshness of Seattle, and the fact that it is a place conducive to conversations:

---

<sup>3</sup> Waszkiewicz (2022) uses the term "third space" rather than "third place," but their definition corresponds to Oldenburg's (1999) concept of the third place.

In one corner of the city stands a coffee shop. / A place that is only open when the sun is sleeping. / A place where people share their stories (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2020).

As some look for answers off the beaten path... / Seeking bittersweet comforts to help pass on lonely nights. / In a night-blooming coffee shop standing between the rainy streets... / They'd find a small respite, through a cup of warm drink (Narrator; Toge Productions, 2023).

Coffee Talk is a warm place that contrasts with the outside world (visible in the game through three windows) where it is constantly raining. From inside the coffee shop, the player sees eerie silhouettes walking down the street nearby. The hostile nature of the outside world is reinforced by the daily news that appears on the front page of the *Evening Whispers*, the local newspaper. The news notably talks about job loss, racial profiling in the workplace, illegal drug sale, digital data leakage, and a zombie infection. As Tuan (1977) explains, the space outside a place influences the meaning of that place: the unsettling nature of space allows us to better appreciate the security of a place (p. 6). This is something the game characters also emphasize. In the second game, for example, Gala tells the other customers: “I wish we lived in a world where everyone had that... / A place to be safe while the rain falls outside,” and Baileys later says: “You know, being like this, all together, when it’s dark and damp... / And feeling good and safe... and home... / It’s a pretty rare feeling in a kinda-public place” (Toge Productions, 2023).

Coffee Talk appears as a refuge that allows the game characters to temporarily escape an uncertain future, or at least, to make it more bearable. It allows them to find a home within chaos and to find stability. The series emphasizes the consumption of hot drinks (coffee, tea, herbal tea, hot chocolate, and hot milk) and the comfort they provide. Some drinks also remind the characters of good memories or trips they went on and evoke nostalgia: “The taste is... really authentic. / Just like the Teh Tarik you get in South East Asia” (Myrtle; Toge Productions, 2020). For short story writer Freya, Coffee Talk is a calm and inspiring place where she can work on her debut novel. It is thus a place that brings her closer to her dream of publishing her first book. Although Coffee Talk is a fictional place, it could be associated with the third wave of coffee culture, which started in the early 2000s and is characterized by the increase popularity of independent cafés in opposition to chains like Starbucks (Gold, 2008). As Waszkiewicz (2022) explains, “these independent cafés emphasize the intimate atmosphere . . . [and] the personal relationship between the customer and the barista, prioritizing the experience of drinking coffee (its taste, smell, and texture) over the impersonal character of the chain restaurants” (pp. 89–90). Places like Coffee Talk create a heterotopic intimacy, i.e., a form of intimacy that is made possible by the existence of heterotopic places.

On a genre level, *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* correspond to Tanya X. Short et al.'s (2018) definition of “cozy games,” i.e., games that are soothing and comforting for the player, allow them to relax, and, I would add, can ease their transition to sleep (see also Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020). According to Short et al. (2018), cozy games evoke “the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness” (section 1, para. 1) through their aesthetic, narrative, and mechanics. *Coffee Talk* offers to its customers a soothing experience, and this experience extends to the player, who feels immersed in the game. The player can feel the warmth of the coffee shop, the heat of the customers’ hot drinks, and relive certain sensations by drawing on their personal experiences. Certain sounds are particularly evocative, such as that of hot liquid pouring into a cup or the sound of a customer taking a sip of coffee or tea. The presence of aesthetically pleasing images to accompany these sounds makes them even more effective. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* also evoke softness through their chillhop background music, which invites the player to slow down and live in the moment. Finally, the fact that both games entirely take place in the same coffee shop gives the player time to familiarize themselves with it and gradually feel a sense of place. While the player might not feel “at home” as much as in their home base in *Minecraft* or *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (see Vella, 2019), they can still become attached to the coffee shop and know what it is like to virtually be in that place. This feeling is arguably even more present among players who have completed the first game and are now playing the second instalment. They get the impression of being once more in a place that was already familiar to them.

*Coffee Talk* therefore appears as a heterotopia partly because of its ambience that positions it as a counter-site where it is good to be. Each time a character enters or leaves the coffee shop, the player hears the ring of a bell, which delimits this place and separates it from the outside world. In their analysis of the first game of the series, Waszkiewicz (2022) notes that *Coffee Talk* differs from both traditional coffee shops, which are open during the day, and from bars and pubs, which sell alcoholic beverages (p. 93); *Coffee Talk* is thus positioned as an “other space,” to use Foucault’s (1967/2008) term. I would add that bars and pubs are generally noisy places where it can be difficult to have a conversation. *Coffee Talk* contrasts with such places and allows its customers to discuss, and above all, to feel listened to. Aqua, a shy researcher who works on her first video game, meets Myrtle, a game designer who advises her and becomes her friend (and possibly her love interest), while Riona realizes after talking with a few customers that she must overcome her fear of being rejected and take a chance if she ever wants to become an opera singer. Many turn to their screen to feel connected and cope with loneliness, as the prologue of *Coffee Talk 2* indicates, but the characters of the series still choose to go to the eponymous coffee shop. Their mobile phones are usually on the counter next to them, as if to indicate that despite the ubiquity of technology and social



media, they are interested in in-person contact. During a conversation with Silver (Neil), an alien who tries to understand how social interactions work on Earth, Myrtle suggests to him: “Start listening the way we listen... / Which, essentially, is *not* really listening at all” (Toge Productions, 2020, emphasis in the original). The social interactions that take place in *Coffee Talk* contrast with this description of society: the characters listen to each other and develop genuine relationships. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are also an opportunity for players to meet endearing fictional characters and get to know them. Days go by and the player does not know which character will come to the coffee shop (unless they have already completed the games), always creating a pleasant surprise and a small joy when a beloved character shows up. Listening to the game characters and preparing the drinks they order become a sort of comforting ritual, especially for players who play the game every evening, little by little, (half) an hour at a time (like I did).

Interestingly, Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020) mention that cozy games can evoke security by providing inclusive spaces, and this is what *Coffee Talk* does. The series’ coffee shop is a safe place that allows marginalized people to let their guard down, open up about their lives, talk about social injustices, and simply exist without being harassed. *Coffee Talk* is notably an inclusive place for Silver and Amanda, two clumsy aliens who try to adapt to the customs of planet Earth and with whom the customers of *Coffee Talk* are patient and understanding. It is also an inclusive place for Lua and Baileys, a succubus and an elf who are in a relationship but face racism from Baileys’ parents, who consider succubi as an inferior race. In the second game, Baileys even evokes the notion of “chosen family,” a term traditionally used by queer folks to describe alternative families that encompass friends, lovers, co-parents, and (adoptive) children and are “organized through ideologies of love, choice, and creation” in contrast with biological or blood families (Weston, 1991/1997, p. 27). When asked by the barista about him and Lua’s wedding, Baileys ends up mentioning who will be invited and says: “Just us and our closest family members... / Whether we got them at birth or chose them ourselves” (Toge Productions, 2023). Baileys then invites Silver and Amanda and mentions the “Cafe family” (see Figure 3), highlighting how the series’ coffee shop allows the characters to develop special bonds that go beyond biological ties. Although the series does not feature any explicitly queer characters, it still contains a queer subtext: Hyde and Gala, two long-time friends, sometimes seem to flirt, whereas Myrtle and Aqua, two characters with opposite personalities, begin to see each other outside the coffee shop. The safe nature of *Coffee Talk* is, however, challenged when a xenophobic inspector visits the coffee shop and starts asking questions to the customers and the barista about the presence of illegal alien immigrants – Silver and Amanda. Unsurprisingly, all of them refuse to give

him information and help Silver (*Coffee Talk 1*) and later Amanda (*Coffee Talk 2*) to hide. In *Coffee Talk 2*, Lua bluntly responds to the inspector:

You have no jurisdiction to come here and act like a big shot / I've never seen anyone in this café who doesn't belong here! / So I suggest you take your suspicions elsewhere... / ... / I can feel myself getting angry, Mr. Agent. / And trust me... / You do NOT want to see me angry! (Toge Productions, 2023)

Lua's message is clear: *Coffee Talk* is a place where everyone is welcome, except those who make discriminatory comments.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 3.** Baileys (left) is inviting Silver (middle) and Amanda (right) to his wedding in *Coffee Talk 2*. Screenshot by the author.

In short, *Coffee Talk* can be seen as a heterotopia of compensation, a term originally used by Foucault (1967/2008) to talk about a “real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly, ill constructed and sketchy” (p. 21). While *Coffee Talk* is not a perfect place, it is still more peaceful than the rest of Seattle. Social interactions are valued and the few conflicts that arise are

<sup>4</sup> The xenophobic comments of the inspector are also at times reminiscent of a transphobic discourse: “Aliens who try to pass for Earthlings are a bigger problem. / . . . / For one, it just muddles things. No matter how much they try to look like Earthlings . . . / They were born aliens, and aliens they will remain. / But now they’re aliens who don’t look like aliens. / What does that mean, you know? And where does it stop? / What if some Earthlings decided they wanted to look like aliens? / That would be a huge mess” (Agent, *Coffee Talk 2*).

ephemeral and ultimately allow the characters to better understand each other and gain emotional maturity. This place makes more visible the problems of the outside world, whether it is social precarity or racial tensions, and highlights the absurdity of these tensions: if the customers of Coffee Talk can all coexist and help each other, why are people in the outside world not able to do so? Although heterotopias are grounded in the real world (unlike utopias), they reveal possibilities that are sometimes hard to imagine in everyday life, and this is what Coffee Talk does for its customers – and by extension, for the player. It is also worth mentioning that Coffee Talk exists in the series’ fictional universe but that Lucas, a regular customer in the second game, is unable to locate it on his mobile phone. This highlights the utopian nature of this place. In the next section, I continue my analysis of place and heterotopia by turning to theories of immersion, which, as we will see, offer several research avenues that complement those I have previously discussed.

### **The immersive experience of *Coffee Talk***

Questions of space and place in game studies have notably been explored through theories of immersion. As many authors point out, video games can generate immersive moments during which the player has the sensation of leaving their current location and integrating the space of the game (e.g., Brown & Cairns, 2004; Calleja, 2011; Murray, 1997/2017; Trépanier-Jobin & Couturier, 2018). Bob Witmer and Michael Singer (1998) describe immersion as “a psychological state characterized by perceiving oneself to be enveloped by, included in, and interacting with an environment that provides a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences” (p. 227). In her work on literature and electronic media, Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) offers a conceptualization of immersion in relation to the possible worlds theory. She sees fiction as a form of virtual reality experience and describes it as a “space-travel vehicle” through which the reader’s consciousness is transported into a nonactual possible world (Ryan, 2015, p. 73). Gordon Calleja (2011), on the other hand, prefers the term “incorporation” rather than “immersion” and uses it to refer to a double phenomenon:

the player incorporates (in the sense of internalizing or assimilating) the game environment into consciousness while simultaneously being incorporated through the avatar into that environment. The simultaneous occurrence of these two processes is a necessary condition for the experience of incorporation. Put in another way, incorporation occurs when the game world is present to the player while the player is simultaneously present, via her avatar, to the virtual environment (p. 169, emphasis in the original).

For Calleja, incorporation occurs when the player has the feeling of inhabiting the space, of being present in the game environment through their avatar. It occurs when the game generates different types of engagement (spatial, narrative, affective, etc.; Calleja, 2011).

My immersive experience with *Coffee Talk* is intimately related to the platform on which I played this series: the Nintendo Switch in handheld mode. In his book *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, Geoff King (2000) explains that movie theatres which screen Hollywood blockbusters use specific immersive strategies:

Big widescreen cinema claims to fill the viewer's vision. Multichannel hi-fi sound . . . adds significantly to the impression of immersion in a three-dimensional experience. Viewers are assaulted by a brand of spectacle that might amount to sheer pace and kinetics; to loudness that can be felt as bodily vibration, and brightness that makes the eyes contract. . . . The viewer is sold the illusion of being transported into the world on-screen, of experiencing more directly the moments (p. 33, emphasis in the original).

The Nintendo Switch in its handheld mode uses immersive strategies that are quite different: the screen is smaller (although it is larger than that of the Game Boy Color or the Nintendo DS), and for this reason, the player brings the image closer to them, as one would do with a book, creating a more intimate experience with the console.<sup>5</sup> The sound is not particularly loud, but the player can hear it well due to their proximity to the console. The player can also easily carry the console to a place that favours their immersion and chose a posture that suits them (they can sit, lie on their back, or lie on their stomach). The device is in appearance less impressive than the movie theatres described by King (2000), but I feel just as much (or even more) transported into the world of *Coffee Talk* as when I go to the theatre. I feel the game's ambience entering my room and making it cozier. This immersive feeling is reinforced by the proximity of the screen, which places the player and the characters on the same level; the feeling of maintained eye contact gives the player the impression of speaking directly to the characters. In addition, due to the game's first-person point of view, the player character is never visible onscreen and takes up little space in the story; it is an empty shell on which the player can project themselves.

Following Calleja's (2011) typology, several types of involvement are present in *Coffee Talk 1* and 2. Both games are predominantly story-driven and rely entirely

---

<sup>5</sup> I even caught myself bringing the screen of my Nintendo Switch closer to my face and inhaling to smell it as I would do with the pages of a book.

on interactions with fictional characters, and for this reason, narrative and shared involvement is central to the game experience.<sup>6</sup> Affective involvement is also present, mainly through the sense of attachment the player develops to certain characters and the player's affective response to specific events or dialogues (the funny way Silver and Amanda express themselves, for example, or certain injustices the game denounces). Calleja's model does not take specifically into account sensory involvement,<sup>7</sup> but this form of involvement is present in *Coffee Talk*, notably through ambient music, environmental sounds, warm colours, and hot drinks that evoke comfort and softness. Three other types of involvement are less present in the series. Ludic involvement, which concerns the player's choices and the impact of these choices in the game, is rather weak: *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are very linear, and the player never explicitly has to make any decisions. However, the drinks they prepare can influence the story arc of some characters. Kinesthetic involvement, which is based on the internalization of the game controls, is almost absent since the game mainly consists in pressing a single button in order to display the text one or two sentences at a time. Lastly, spatial involvement, which concerns the navigation, exploration, and familiarization with the game space, is not present since the player cannot move and explore the environment. In fact, if the player has the impression of being present in *Coffee Talk*, of inhabiting the place and knowing the coffee shop, it is essentially due to the other types of involvement the game puts forward: narrative, shared, affective, and sensory involvement. It is through these types of involvement that, in Ryan's (2015) terms, the player's consciousness relocates itself in *Coffee Talk* and "reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality" – a move she calls "recentering" (p. 73).

In their work on immersion, Dominic Arsenault and Martin Picard (2008) argue that it is easier for players to feel immersed in a familiar universe: "a universe already known by the player will favour immersion because it is easier to 'feel comfortable' and identify with a world if it is based on a known personal experience" (p. 12, my translation). The authors mostly refer to game universes that players are already familiar with because of their previous experiences with a game franchise, but I would stress that this idea of familiarity also applies to games that seek to reproduce mundane activities. This observation is particularly interesting when applied to a series like *Coffee Talk*, which takes place in a rather modest coffee shop and centres on an activity that many players have already experienced: chatting around a hot beverage. It is easier

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Calleja's (2011) model, shared involvement depends on the player's interaction with other agents in the game (human- or computer-controlled).

<sup>7</sup> Calleja (2011) seems to include it as part of affective involvement. He notes in his chapter on this topic that "the evocative power of graphics and sound should not be discounted" (p. 140), but his analysis of sensory involvement is quite limited.

in such circumstances to feel sensations and to be “moved” by what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls “ordinary affects,” i.e., by those ordinary encounters and rhythms “that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences” (p. 2). *Coffee Talk* interestingly shows that slowness can be immersive. Following Tuan (1977), who describes place as “a pause in movement” (p. 138), I would argue that slowness allows the coffee shop of *Coffee Talk* to become a place and makes it possible for the player to “feel” this place – to feel the intensities and slight shudders “passing through and between everyday spaces and bodies” (Nautiyal, 2016, p. 100). On the other hand, Calleja (2011) explains that the player builds a cognitive map of the game environment, and as their map improves, their relationship with this environment changes: the player becomes more comfortable and develops a sense of belonging to the environment (p. 87). This process of internalization of space leads the player to see the game environment as part of their immediate surroundings and to perceive certain environments as places, and not only as spaces (Calleja, 2011, p. 87). The fact that the entirety of *Coffee Talk* is set in the same place and that this place is always presented to the player through the same series of images – the player briefly sees the coffee shop from the outside at the beginning of each day and then mostly from inside<sup>8</sup> – allows the player to develop a sense of place relatively quickly and to share this feeling with the game characters.

The images in *Coffee Talk* are located in the sense that they show a place – the titular coffee shop – and it could be tempting to believe that these images remain the same regardless of where the player plays the game; however, this is not entirely true. The images stay the same in that they do not change, but their impact on the player changes depending on the player’s location. Unlike a fresco integrated into the architecture or a monument in the public space, the images of *Coffee Talk* go where the player carries their Nintendo Switch: in a certain way, they are delocated and then relocated where the player goes. As Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson (2020) explain, our experiences with video games (and with other media) are not only digital, but also material: they are “interwoven in the messy construction and experience of space, place, knowing, and being in the contemporary world” (p. 15). Play in the domestic space more specifically influences our routines and relationships to places; it amplifies the affective spaces of the house and becomes integrated into its atmosphere (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020, pp. 38, 42–43). Play becomes associated with these spaces and the ordinary affects they evoke, and these associations stay in our memory – they influence how we then orient ourselves toward these spaces. As Sara

---

<sup>8</sup> The camera is sometimes more to the left or to the right depending on the number of customers in the coffee shop and where they sit, but the image remains essentially the same.

Ahmed (2006) explains, orientation of bodies is not casual or originary, but acquired “through the repetitions of some actions over others” (p. 58). Almost two decades before the work of Hjorth and Richardson, Bernadette Flynn (2003) encouraged researchers to reframe how they conceptualized the impact of video game consoles on the home. She proposed the concept of the “digital hearth” to describe how gaming and changing consumption habits had transformed the meaning of the home, with the living room becoming a site of collective engagement centred on the console. Flynn observed at the time that this change reflected the transition from public to private forms of entertainment. For Samuel Tobin (2013), who worked on the Nintendo DS, the various rooms in the house influence the game in different ways (p. 65). The author notably analyzes the bedroom and talks about the different challenges it poses compared to the living room (p. 77). According to him,

The smaller size of the room, the dominance of the bed, the more constrained floor plan, and the more narrow range of activities usually pursued in the bedroom compared to the living room require more negotiation and redefinition of space for game play on either a console or hand-held system (Tobin, 2013, p. 77).

With that in mind, I would like to briefly analyze in the remainder of this paper the place where I played *Coffee Talk* and that favoured my immersion: my bed (see Figure 4). I am aware that describing my bed as a place might seem a little odd, but I am drawing here on the work of Cresswell (2015), who invites us to see place as “a way of understanding the world” (p. 18). He writes:

Most often the designation of place is given to something quite small in scale, but not too small. Neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities are easily referred to as places and these are the kinds of places that most often appear in writing on place. There is little writing on the corner of a favorite room as place at one scale, or on the globe at another. Yet, as Tuan suggested, there is something of place in all of these...  
...When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience (Cresswell, 2014, p. 18).



**Figure 4.** The author's bed.

This is how I see my bed: as a place I am attached to and that gives me access to different experiences, whether it is through dreams, reading, or video games. I would even say that my bed is a heterotopia in that it is delimited from the rest of my room. It is an idealized place that allows me to rest and in which I only slide into at a specific moment of the day: in the evening, when it is time to sleep (or a little before, if I plan to play on my Nintendo Switch). I cannot go inside my bed as I want: I first need to put on my pyjamas and brush my teeth; I need to “submit to rites and to purifications,” to borrow Foucault’s terms (1967/2008, p. 21). It is therefore a place that implies “a system of opening and closing that both isolates [it] and makes [it] penetrable” (p. 21). My bed also allows for the juxtaposition of several seemingly incompatible spaces or places: that of dreams and reality (wakefulness), but also that of reality (my bed) and video games (the coffee shop). Going back to Ahmed (2006), I would highlight that my perception of my bed as a heterotopia and the feeling of coziness my bed evokes is influenced by habits, repetitions, and orientations. Although *Coffee Talk* is a relaxing series on its own, the cozy place where I played this series and how I oriented myself toward that place and toward various objects within that place made *Coffee Talk* even more soothing and contributed to my feeling of immersion in the fictional coffee shop.



The comfort of my bed, the fact that I played the games under my covers, lying on my stomach or on my side, the head on my pillow, with my stuff animals and my dressing gown by my side, complemented the ambience of *Coffee Talk* and accentuated its comforting nature. Short et al. (2018) remind us that feelings of coziness depend not only on the game but also on the player and their state of mind. I would add here that the player's environment is also an important factor; the question of space and place is thus present even before immersion begins. In this context, the bed could be seen as a heterotopia that allows for cozy play and could be put in parallel with Johan Huizinga's (1938/1949) concept of "play-ground." Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*:

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (p. 10).

Huizinga's definition recalls at times Foucault's heterotopia, and the various play-grounds Huizinga mentions could be seen as heterotopias that allow different forms of play. The bed would be one of them.

## Conclusion

This paper has offered a reflection on place, heterotopia, and immersion in the *Coffee Talk* series. I first sought to demonstrate that the coffee shop in this series can be seen as a heterotopic place that is soothing and comforting for the game characters and the player thanks to its warm ambience and welcoming nature. Then, I have analyzed the different ways immersion takes place in *Coffee Talk* and the impact of the place where I played this series – my bed – on my immersive experience, a topic often overlooked in game studies.

I would like to conclude this paper by briefly highlighting two other research avenues that *Coffee Talk* allows us to explore, but that were beyond the scope of this paper. In her short piece "Slouching Toward Relevant Video Games," Brie Code (2017) encourages game designers to create games that centre on care and that seek to elicit "tend-and-befriend" rather than "fight-or-flight" responses. Along the same lines, Anthony Dungan (2020) has argued that game designers should seek to use verbs like "painting," "debating," "teaching," or "camping," rather than the same limited set of violent verbs like "shooting" and "punching." This would allow video games to better reflect the human experience in all its complexity, he writes. *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* are interesting cases to further reflect on these alternative ways

of designing games as their gameplay centres on the verb “listening.” Secondly, I would highlight that *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* and other cozy games like *A YEAR OF SPRINGS* (npckc, 2021), *New Pokémon Snap* (Bandai Namco Studios, 2021), and *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021) can be used for self-care. I have been working on trauma-like gaming experiences for the past four years and I found myself increasingly playing cozy games, unconsciously seeking to take a break from the challenging topics I was working on (suicide, depression, loneliness, war, etc.). Playing games like *Coffee Talk 1* and *2* became for me a mitigation technique, making the experience of working on trauma games more bearable and helping me to find comfort before falling asleep. This is not really surprising considering previous research on games as modes of socialization, escapism, and self-care during difficult times, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Barr & Copeland-Steward, 2022; Homo Ludens, 2023; O’Brien et al., 2021), but it would be interesting to further explore this research avenue and see to what extent cozy games specifically can act as a form of self-care and therapy for people who are frequently exposed to disturbing topics (psychologists, social workers, nurses, etc.) and for trauma survivors.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Olivier Asselin and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

---

## Bibliography

- Agnew, J.A. (1987). *Place and politics: The geographical mediation of state and society*. Allen & Unwin.
- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.
- Andiloro, A. (2022). “This must be the place”: Understanding video game placeness through atmosphere and the refrain. In Dark Souls. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 14(2), 207–223. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw\\_00058\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00058_1)
- Arsenault, D. & Picard, M. (2008). Le jeu vidéo entre dépendance et plaisir immersif : les trois formes d’immersion vidéoludique [Video game between dependency and immersive pleasure: The three forms of immersion]. *Acte de colloque d’Homo Ludens. Le jeu vidéo : un phénomène social massivement pratiqué*. [https://ludicine.ca/sites/ludicine.ca/files/arsenault,-picard---le-jeu-video-entre-dependance-et-plaisir-immersif\\_0.pdf](https://ludicine.ca/sites/ludicine.ca/files/arsenault,-picard---le-jeu-video-entre-dependance-et-plaisir-immersif_0.pdf)

- Barr, M. & Copeland-Stewart, A. (2022). Playing video games during the COVID-19 pandemic and effects on players' well-being. *Games and Culture*, 17(1), 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211017036>
- Bolzoni, E. (2013). Heterotopic cafés and urban resistance: A reading of the nostalgic Parisian cityscapes of Modiano and Debord. *1616: Anuario de Literatura Comparada*, 3, 139–152.
- Breger, C. (2008). Digital digs, or Lara Croft replaying Indiana Jones: Archaeological tropes and “colonial loops” in new media narrative. *Aether: The Journal of Media Geography*, 11, 41–60.
- Brown, E. & Cairns, P. (2004). A grounded investigation of game immersion. *CHI 2004*, 1297–1300. <https://doi.org/10.1145/985921.986048>
- Calleja, G. (2011). *In-game: From immersion to incorporation*. MIT Press.
- Code, B. (2017, March 8). Slouching toward relevant video games. *GamesIndustry.biz*. Online: <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/slouching-toward-relevant-video-games>
- Coffee Talk*. (n.d.). Steam. Online: [https://store.steampowered.com/app/914800/Coffee\\_Talk/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/914800/Coffee_Talk/) (accessed on November 13, 2023).
- Coffee Talk episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly*. (n.d.). Steam. Online: [https://store.steampowered.com/app/1663220/Coffee\\_Talk\\_Episode\\_2\\_Hibiscus\\_\\_Butterfly/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/1663220/Coffee_Talk_Episode_2_Hibiscus__Butterfly/) (accessed on November 13, 2023).
- Cresswell, T. (2015). *Place: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Domsch, S. (2019). Space and narrative in computer games. In: E. Aarseth & S. Günzel (Eds.), *Ludotopia: Spaces, places and territories in computer games* (pp. 103–123). transcript Verlag.
- Dungan, A. (2020, May 3). Nonviolent verbs and why video games need more of them. *Thoughtful Play*. Online: <https://pages.stolaf.edu/thoughtfulplay/nonviolent-verbs-and-why-video-games-need-more-of-them/> (accessed on December 26, 2023).
- Flynn, B. (2003). Geography of the digital hearth. *Information, Communication & Society*, 6(4), 551–576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118032000163259>
- Foucault, M. (2008). Of other spaces (L. De Cauter & M. Dehaene, Trans.). In: L. De Cauter & M. Dehaene (Eds.), *Heterotopia and the city: Public space in a postcivil society* (pp. 13–30). Routledge. (Original work published 1967).
- Goetz, C. (2012). Tether and accretions: Fantasy as form in videogames. *Games and Culture*, 7(6), 419–440. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012466288>
- Gold, J. (2008, March 12). La Mill: The latest buzz. *LA Weekly*. Online: <https://www.laweekly.com/la-mill-the-latest-buzz/> (accessed on December 26, 2023).
- Harvey, A. (2015). *Gender, age, and digital games in the domestic context*. Routledge.
- Hetherington, K. (1997). *The badlands of modernity: Heterotopia and social ordering*. Routledge.

- Hjorth, L. & Richardson, I. (2020). *Ambient play*. MIT Press.
- Homo Ludens. (2023). Usages et appropriations du jeu vidéo *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* en contexte de pandémie [Use and appropriation of the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* in the pandemic context]. *Kinephanos. Revue d'études des médias et de culture populaire*, 9(1), 37–75. <https://www.kinephanos.ca/ojs/index.php/revue/article/view/usages>
- Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. (Original work published 1938).
- Jenkins, H. (2004). Game design as narrative architecture. In: N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First person: New media as story, performance, and game* (pp. 118–130). MIT Press.
- King, G. (2000). *Spectacular narratives: Hollywood in the age of the blockbuster*. Tauris.
- Kömeçoğlu, U. (2005). The publicness and sociabilities of the Ottoman coffeehouse. *Javnost – The Public*, 12(2), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2005.11008885>
- Mukherjee, S. (2015). The playing fields of Empire: Empire and spatiality in video games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 7(3), 299–315. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.7.3.299\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.7.3.299_1)
- Murray, J. (2017). *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (Rev. ed.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1997).
- Murray, S. (2017). *On video games: The visual politics of race, gender and space*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Nautiyal, J. (2016). Aesthetic and affective experiences in coffee shops: A Deweyan engagement with ordinary affects in ordinary spaces. *Education and Culture*, 32(2), 99–118. <https://doi.org/10.5703/educationculture.32.2.0099>
- Nitsche, M. (2008). *Video game spaces: Image, play, and structure in 3D worlds*. MIT Press.
- Nooney, L. (2013). A pedestal, a table, a love letter: Archaeologies of gender in video-game history. *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 13(2). <https://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney>
- O'Brien, R.P., Parra, L.A., & Cederbaum, J.A. (2021). “Trying my best”: Sexual minority adolescents’ self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(6), 1053–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.03.013>
- Oldenburg, R. (1999). *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Da Capo Press.
- Robinson, J.A. & Bowman, N.D. (2022). Returning to Azeroth: Nostalgia, sense of place, and social presence in *World of Warcraft Classic*. *Games and Culture*, 17(3), 421–444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211034759>
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1986). The aesthetic transaction. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 20(4), 122–128. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3332615>

- Ruberg, B. (2020). Straight paths through queer walking simulators: Wandering on rails and speedrunning in *Gone Home*. *Games and Culture*, 15(6), 632–652. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019826746>
- Ryan, M.-L. (2015). *Narrative as virtual reality 2: Revisiting immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Short, T.X., Ordon, A., Hurd, D., Howe, C., Forbes, J., Eiserloh, S., Diaz, J., Cook, D., & Meiners, R. (2018, January 24). Cozy games. *Lostgarden*. Online: <https://lostgarden.home.blog/2018/01/24/cozy-games/> (accessed on December 26, 2023).
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press.
- Tobin, S. (2013). *Portable play in everyday life: The Nintendo DS*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Totten, C.W. (2014). *An architectural approach to level design*. Taylor & Francis.
- Trépanier-Jobin, G. & Couturier, A. (2018). L'immersion fictionnelle au-delà de la narrativité [Fictional immersion beyond narrativity]. *Sciences du jeu*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.4000/sdj.950>
- Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Vella, D. (2019). There's no place like home: Dwelling and being at home in digital games. In: E. Aarseth & S. Günzel (Eds.), *Ludotopia: Spaces, places and territories in computer games* (pp. 141–165). transcript Verlag.
- Waszkiewicz, A. (2022). *Delicious pixels: Food in video games*. De Gruyter.
- Waszkiewicz, A. & Bakun, M. (2020). Towards the aesthetics of cozy games. *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 12(3), 225–240. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw\\_00017\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00017_1)
- Weston, K. (1997). *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship* (Rev. ed.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1991).
- Witmer, B.G. & Singer, M.J. (1998). Measuring presence in virtual environments: A presence questionnaire. *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 7(3), 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1162/105474698565686>
- Wolf, M.J.P. (2001). *The medium of the videogame*. University of Texas Press.
- Yu, E.B. (2023). Lost in a dream: Queering time and space in *Yume Nikki*. *Press Start*, 9(1), 21–37. <https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/226/133>

## Ludography

- Bandai Namco Studios. (2021). *New Pokémon Snap* [Nintendo Switch]. Nintendo and The Pokémon Company.
- Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of Warcraft* [PC]. Blizzard Entertainment.
- Blizzard Entertainment. (2019). *World of Warcraft Classic* [PC]. Blizzard Entertainment.

- FromSoftware. (2009). *Dark Souls* [PlayStation 3]. Namco Bandai Games.
- Mojang Studios. (2011). *Minecraft* [PC]. Mojang Studios.
- Nintendo EAD. (2012). *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* [Nintendo 3DS]. Nintendo.
- npckc. (2021). *A YEAR OF SPRINGS* [Nintendo Switch]. npckc.
- Re-Logic. (2011). *Terraria* [PC]. 505 Games.
- Toge Productions. (2020). *Coffee Talk* [Nintendo Switch]. Toge Productions.
- Toge Productions. (2023). *Coffee Talk Episode 2: Hibiscus & Butterfly*. Toge Productions.
- Witch Beam (2021). *Unpacking* [PC]. Humble Games.

**Samuel Poirier-Poulin** is a Ph.D. candidate in film studies at the Université de Montréal, Canada, specializing in the study of video games and gaming cultures. His doctoral research investigates trauma-like gaming experiences and draws on affect theory and phenomenology of media. His other research interests include romance and queer desires in the visual novel, autoethnography, and multilingual scholarship. Samuel's work has appeared in *Journal of Games Criticism*, *Synoptique: An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies*, *Loading: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, and in the anthology *Video Games and Comedy*. Since 2022, Samuel is the Editor-in-Chief of the game studies journal *Press Start*. You can find out more about his work on his website: <http://www.spoirierpoulin.com>