Animal Crossing, kindness, and combatting isolation: understanding the impact of videogames under lockdown

Introduction:

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a valuable site within which to explore ideas surrounding isolation, community and kindness. The Animal Crossing franchise's original creator, Katsuya Eguchi, designed the first Animal Crossing game because he was lonely, having just moved over 300 miles to Kyoto to work at Nintendo.

About Animal Crossing:

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is the 5th main game installment in Nintendo's Animal Crossing franchise, exclusively for the Nintendo Switch Console. It is a nonlinear, real-time videogame in which the player travels to a deserted island, managed by the tycoon racoon Tom Nook. On this island, the player builds up their home, decorates a town and the surrounding greenery, as well as fishing, chopping wood, crafting items and other repetitive tasks. Within the first weeks of play, the player finds animal neighbours to live on their own island. The player can also enrich the islands culture by donating bugs, fossils or artwork to the island museum. The game also features real time events, for example players experience a recent Halloween event in-game, which involved candy and dressing up. Animal Crossing: New Horizons saw immense popularity under lockdown, during which people were denied regular in-person contact and were mostly stuck at home. Released on the 20th of March 2020, it has since sold over 22 million copies (Nintendo).

Project Background:

The National Videogame Museum's Animal Crossing Diaries' project, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Museum Association, will examine the lived experience of Animal Crossing under lockdown through oral history and other ethnographic research methods. The project will experiment with how we record and collect the experience of playing a videogame. The resulting online collection will form an innovative digital exhibition. This research, led by the partner organisation for my Collaborate Doctoral Award, will allow me to explore questions of the potential and power of play in my own project.

My wider research investigates gamer subjectivities within the United Kingdom in collaboration with the British Games Institute and the National Videogame Museum, under Midlands4Cities, at Nottingham University. I am interested in videogame history, gamer identities and subjectivities, the experience of play and the function, or dysfunction, of ideology in games and furthermore the mythologisation of the stereotype of the isolated male gamer.

Figure 1, Bertha, a hippo villager, greeting the player with a personal nickname.

Bio:

Imo Kaufman is a first year PhD student at the University of Nottingham.
Contact them here: imogen.kaufman@nottingham.ac.uk

Figure 2, Hamphrey, a hamster Villager, addressing the player with a secret greeting.

Research and Goals:

Methodology:

Although the Animal Crossing Diaries' project is still in development stage, key methodological approaches such as, qualitative study, including oral history interviews, will be central to the approach of the project.

Research Aims:

To explore the individual experiences of Animal Crossing under lockdown and understand why this game meant so much to people within the context of its release. To understand what Animal Crossing means to players, and *why* it means what it does. And to record, with individuality and subjectivities in mind, these experiences. Research must be aligned with the National Videogame Museum's ethos too; to preserve and capture moments of videogame history with an honest and inclusive approach.

Through this research, the museum will engage creatively with how we collect these individual, subjective experiences of play and in turn address questions as to how they can preserve the experience of playing a videogame as an institution.

Potential Impact:

The research will culminate in an online exhibition at the National Videogame Museum. The research will have implications for the way we record videogame histories, by prioritising the human (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 166) in the forefront of its research.

This project will contribute to ongoing conversations within videogame research, particularly how games can generate real emotional responses within the player, how virtual, fictional relationships can feel real and how important digital community can be in times of crisis. It will help further conversations about how games produce meaning, why they matter and how games are intrinsically personal (Ruberg, 27.)

Bibliography:

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Note: all images provided are screen shots from Imo Kaufman's own Animal Crossing: New Horizons Nintendo Switch game.

Concepts at play:

Ludic approaches to videogames understand that games can be interpreted as systems, as procedural moments which can reproduce and represent values. Scholars such as Bogost, Flanagan, Nissenbaum and Sutton-Smith have all explored the potential for games, as systems, to represent ideas and create simulations. Other qualities of Animal Crossing do warrant discussion, but here the focus will be it's simulation of community; fictional, virtual and real. Games scholar Bogost has acknowledged the potential for the Game Cube version of Animal Crossing, a prior instalment of the game without online capabilities, to help a family stay connected (Bogost, 267.)

Halberstam, when discussing low theory as a theoretical framework for looking at mainstream animated films argues for investigating the micro, the irrelevant, in "making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely" (Halberstam, 21). This idea of the 'micro' has great significance within Animal Crossing.

Making a difference through the little and the inconsequential is at the heart of Animal Crossing's virtual community. You may, or you may not, talk to your villagers every day and give them a gift; an inconsequential action that can easily be forgotten. If you neglect to talk to your villagers, they will send you notecards in the post telling you they've missed you, that they enjoy spending time with you. If you spend time away from the game, by literally not playing it, when you return your villagers will express worry and relief; they are glad to see you, they have missed you (see *Figure 4*).

There are no explicit rewards for befriending your villagers. If you become good enough friends, they will have secret greetings with you, let you pick a personal nickname or suggest one for you (see *Figure 1*). If you become the best of friends (by reaching a hidden score of 100 in your friendship) they will gift you with a picture of themselves. But aside from this, there are no material rewards in-game. The reward in of itself, is a simulation of a close friendship. The message that Animal Crossing expresses here, then, is that friendship should be engaged with for friendship's sake.

There is potential for real life relationships to flourish in Animal Crossing. Scholars such as Newman have previously emphasised the importance of the social in gaming (Newman, 148). Under lockdown, Animal Crossing provided a safe virtual space where we could meet with our friends and family, and even hit each other with virtual bug catching nets (see *Figure 3*). Its social potential extended to work meetings, parties and it has even become a site for virtual political protest. For example, Animal Crossing Villagers can be taught certain political phrases (see *Figure 5*) so anyone who visits that player's island will also see them.

For Flanagan and Nissenbaum, games not only have values embedded within them but also reflect beliefs within a specific time and place; the ideology of a game is also a product of its cultural context (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 33). The context for Animal Crossing: New Horizon's release must then influence how we interpret and understand its meaning. The virtual community that Animal Crossing has provided to millions of players, both fictional and real, should not be underestimated in its importance in a time when basic in-person human connections are mostly impossible.

> "Making a difference through the little and the inconsequential is at the heart of Animal Crossing's virtual community."

Figure 5, Marshal, a squirrel Villager, learning the phrase ACAB from fellow Villager, Pongo, who is an anteater.

Figure 3, Two Animal Crossing players on a date in-game.

Role of digital technologies:

Digital technologies are key to this research. Not only is the site of research a videogame, but also the methods of research, such as sharing artwork, written work, videos and recordings etc., and performing oral history interviews, will involve digital methods, partly as a result of lockdown. The results of this research will be presented in an online exhibition at the National Videogame Museum.

Getting Involved

If you would like to learn more about the Animal Crossing Diaries' Project, or get involved please do so here: thenvm.org/animalcrossing/

Figure 4, Stitches, a bear Villager, expressing upset at the player having been absent from the game.

Conclusion:

The popularity of Animal Crossing: New Horizons and the context of its lockdown release makes the Animal Crossing Diaries' project, not only intellectually interesting and valuable to ongoing debates within videogame research, but necessary. Whilst exploring a poignant cultural phenomenon, the project will facilitate exploration of wider conversations; what do videogames mean to us and how do they generate this sense of 'meaning'? And furthermore, how does the ongoing context of lockdown impact the way we think about games, play games and study them?

Only through acknowledging the centrality of the player, and their subjective experience, can we begin to breakdown how games generate meaning and emotion for the player. These questions not only have relevance to videogame study and histories, but also videogame preservation and how we historicise the digital present and past.

The Animal Crossing Diaries' Project will capture intangible moments of player experience. To conclude, I would like to share one moment of my own Animal Crossing experience.

During lockdown, my pet hamster died. The day after, I found Hamphrey in Animal Crossing, a hamster villager, and he moved to my island. When we became close, I set up his secret greeting as "Fudge loves you!" (See *Figure 2*). This moment is entirely fictional, digital and irrelevant, and yet it intrinsically meant something to me. Fudge was a hamster, he certainly did not love me, but when Hamphrey tells me "Fudge loves you" I cannot deny that for a moment, I, the player, felt loved.