



ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on an ethnographic exploration and summary of Animal Crossing and what the video game means to its players. Animal Crossing, created by Nintendo, is a social simulation video game series. This report sets out to summarize and gain an understanding of the significance of Animal Crossing series within its community, specifically, its installment entitled Animal Crossing: New Horizons.

Research Question:

What does Animal Crossing: New Horizons mean to its users?

Objectives for this exploratory ethnographic study included:

- To explore and define the Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) game.
- To explore and understand the social climate and its environment for players of the ACNH community.
- To understand and define the personal significance behind player involvement in the ACNH game and community and its role in players' lives.

Specific questions were asked from participants of this study:

- Can you describe your history with Animal Crossing?
- Why do you choose to play Animal

Crossing?

- How has COVID-19 affected your experience of Animal Crossing?
- What are some of your favorite in-game activities (e.g. fishing, fossil hunting, art dealing, bug catching, crafting, socializing with villagers)? What do you spend your in-game time doing?
- Were you subscribed to Nintendo Switch Online before the release of Animal Crossing: New Horizons? If so, why did you choose to subscribe? If not, did you choose to subscribe because of Animal Crossing? Why?
- What is your opinion of Animal Crossing's messaging system? Do you use other methods of communication such as the Nintendo Switch Online app or Discord to talk to other players?
- On average, in one sitting, how long do you spend playing Animal Crossing: New Horizons?
- Can you describe how playing Animal Crossing makes you feel?
- Do you feel any social pressures within the game?
- Are you involved in other communities with a focus on gaming? If so, how do they compare to the Animal Crossing community?



Our ethnographic study and analysis led us to an understanding of how ACNH users create their culture and define community:

Players establish attitudes, values, and norms that create a culture within the ACNH community.

Players of the ACNH community use the ACNH game as a form of escapism from the pressures of life, specifically, life during a global pandemic.

Players are able to use the ACNH game as a form of self-expression and find joy and fulfillment from mirroring their reality in the game.

Players find ways for self-gratification and control in the game in a variety of ways.

This examination and ethnographic study of the latest installment of the Animal Crossing game and its users identified the significance of the community in ACNH. Players continue to return to the game because of the socialization opportunities it allows, the outlet of escape it provides, the ability to express themselves, and the instantaneous self-gratification. Each participant observed for this study has expressed the significance of the ACNH game in their lives and the reason why.

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INTRODUCTION



Isabelle, a popular character in the Animal Crossing Universe.

Animal Crossing is a life and social simulation game developed and published by Nintendo. Each game has you move to a new town inhabited by adorable anthropomorphic animals. The series began life on the GameCube in 2001, which established many of the franchise's long-running characteristics. The most notable of these is a real-time clock and calendar that mirrors the real-life passage of time. The seasons change as they do in reality. Playing at different times of day provides different things to see and do, too. While the game offers many things to explore, the core gameplay loop is simple. When you start, you are given a basic dwelling and a loan from Tom Nook. You earn currency (known as bells) to pay off your loan, which in turn upgrades your dwelling. You are then given a new loan to work off until you have the biggest house in the village. But there are plenty of other things to do along the way. The island has a museum to fill with bugs, fossils, paintings, and more. You can collect items to sell for a profit. You can spend time socializing and sending letters or gifts to residents and real-life friends.

The latest entry in the series, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, was released worldwide on March 20, 2020¹. The premise of ACNH is centered around heading to a deserted island for a holiday.

1. "Animal Crossing: New Horizons," Nintendo, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/>.



Timmy and Tommy, the twin apprentices of Tom Nook.

To begin, all you have available to you is a tent, and it's up to you to get to know your neighbors and take advantage of the world around you to move up in the world. In addition to anthropomorphic non-playable characters (NPCs), including several long-standing series favorites, New Horizons offers several ways to play with your real-world friends. This can be done remotely via Nintendo Switch Online or locally via local wireless play. It is possible to visit each other's islands, socialize with their residents, go fishing together, and more. New Horizons offers a chance to escape stress, if only for a few hours a day.

The team of this ethnographic study is composed of four members: Darian Adams, Anna Goode, Brianna McBride, and Mia Wimbish. We are all avid players of the ACNH game, and are all particularly drawn to the art style, vibrant color palette, joyful characters, and lullaby-like music. In crafting a team, we decided that a study of Animal

Crossing would be interesting, especially due to the game's latest release of New Horizons. We knew that many of our friends and family were playing ACNH, and thought that studying its growing community during a global pandemic would yield interesting results.

This ethnographic study and report unveils the culture surrounding ACNH. We ask the question: What does the game mean to its users? We followed four phases that roughly equate to Sam Ladner's applied ethnography: recruitment, fieldwork: interviews and observation, analysis, and report writing². First, we had to reach out to users within the AC field and recruit participants. After recruitment, we completed observation and interviewing. Then, as a team, we completed analysis by meeting as a team to discuss our journaling. Finally, we created this report that covers the ethnographic study.

2. Sam Ladner, /Practical Ethnography: A Guide to Doing Ethnography in the Private Sector/ (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

This study is a virtual ethnographic analysis of what Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) means to its users. Ethnography is a qualitative anthropological research method in which the main goal is to understand the social phenomenon within people's everyday lives. This method of analysis is conducted by close exploration of the subject in a field setting. While it can not provide future predictions, it can provide insight into data and generate or validate assumptions.

When an ethnography is done on a small scale and within the context of a business or product, it is called applied ethnography. Applied ethnographic research can provide data from the point of view of the users. This method was applicable to our project because it had to be completed within the duration of the summer semester. It was conducted over the course of four weeks during June and July of 2020.

Because summer classes were moved online during this time due to the COVID-19 outbreak, we adjusted our methods by performing a virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography is a research approach for exploring the social interactions that take place in virtual environments. Our areas of inquiry included the largest ACNH Discord

server, a small grassroots Discord server with origins on Tumblr, a Discord server centered around the game's "black market", and a general Animal Crossing forum on Reddit, a social news and discussion website.

Our data was collected through contextual inquiry, a process that combines immersive participant observation and directed interview techniques. Through contextual research, we were able to determine the scope of the project, our target demographic, and how our research further into the field would unfold. It also gave us a better understanding of ACNH's game mechanics and the communities surrounding it. Field observation was an opportunity to observe AC users in natural virtual settings. Interviews with participants that we encountered in the field allowed us to gather their firsthand experiences with Animal Crossing. We then analyzed the data gathered.

The background of the page is a repeating pattern of stylized, light green leaves. Each leaf is outlined in a darker green and filled with a lighter green, featuring a series of curved lines representing veins. The leaves are scattered across the entire page, creating a textured, organic feel.

The first step of analyzing our data was to reduce it. In order to “prune” the amount of information gained during our research process, we employed reduction techniques such as summarizing by capturing the main points made by participants during observations and interviews and developing a cohering metaphor to summarize complex ideas encountered in our research. A cohering metaphor acts as an explanatory network to expound on symbolic and cultural meaning of the social phenomenon you are researching. We then visualized the data by using conceptually clustered matrices to organize recurring themes we came across. This allowed us to parse through our data by categorizing it based how participants interacted with or answered questions during our interviews. Finally, we looked for patterns and outliers and drew conclusions from the data.

OBSERVATIONS

Observations

While our interviewees were able to provide us with information such as gender and age, the rough demographics of the greater Animal Crossing community were much harder to obtain. The most identifying thing about any given user will often be their profile picture and their username, which can only tell us so much. Because of this, there are few safe generalizations we can make about the composition of the community. However, based on information found in Nintendo's 2020 fiscal year financial report, we've found that a large number of players are in their 20s to 30s, with over 40% of players identifying as female³. It is worth noting that the demographics of player base may not be an exact reflection of the observed AC community.

The Community

All communities partake in some form of gatekeeping. This is not necessarily a way to keep people out, but rather to establish a line by which membership within the community can be defined. Without these boundaries, there would be no such thing as "joining" a community. With a community such as this one, anyone is permitted to participate without invitation, but they are expected to adhere to the rules and values

of the community. Owning the game or otherwise being involved with it in some capacity may be required to be considered a member of the community, but by the same token this does not make the nearly 13 million players that purchased the game members of the community either.

With this in mind, most segments of the community, (In this case, the multiple Discord Servers.) Are inclusive, leaving open invitations and access to most of the relevant channels. Those that join are free to trade items, show off their islands, and discuss playstyles, provided they do it in the appropriate channels. Simply following the rules, however, does not necessarily make you a close-knit member of the community either. Only through continued contributions are members brought into more exclusive "rings". Contributions can be in the form of regularly answering questions from less experienced members, datamining, making art, etc. Though our observations rarely permitted us a perspective on these inner rings, we know that titles granted by higher authorities within a community grant access to more exclusive channels with other contributors.

3. Nintendo Co., Ltd., "Fiscal Year Ended March 2020: Financial Results Explanatory Material," last modified May 7, 2020, https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2020/200507_4e.pdf.

Island Representatives

The game has a heavy emphasis on self-expression and individuality. For the community, the tools provided to this end have been a source of both extensive praise and criticism for Animal Crossing. The player, as the “Island Representative” has very few goals defined by the game. Instead, the game is designed in such a way that players create goals for themselves, and they are encouraged in several ways to express themselves through customization of their avatar and the island that serves as the game’s setting. Should the player continue, then eventually they will run into a roadblock that will impede their progress. Perhaps they are missing a furniture item that would tie a

room together, or a villager that would be right at home on their island. Most likely, the player will take to a Discord channel in order to request an item or villager from any player than can provide them, often in exchange for something of value from their own island. This basic system of trade between players creates something of a marketplace in many of these communities outside of the game, allowing members to always be involved with the game, even when they are not physically on their games. Systems like this deliberately put in place by developers have created communities that organically revolve around the trade of items that other players are looking for.



An islander showing several different outfits.

The Black Market

The same systems that drive players toward one another to trade, also encourages players to seek out alternative means to achieve the progress they search for. These alternative methods can be best described as “Unrestricted play”, as they employ methods that bypass certain in-game limitations. For some players, it is not unusual to be involved in what is known colloquially as the “Black Market”, a community marketplace that deals with the exchange of rare items, villagers, Nook Miles Tickets (NMT’s), and real-world currency. For others, this takes the form of time travelling or hacking. The former being a relatively simple method of rapid progression in the game, achieved by

changing the system clock to a certain date or time in order to meet the criteria for time-based events in game. The latter, however, is a far more involved process that most players do not actively take part in. Smaller, sub-communities have formed around these methods of unrestricted play, with many of those that regularly make use of them isolating themselves from the larger AC community sometimes through entirely separate Discord servers. Many of them have felt as though their method of play has been stigmatized and thus it has been frowned upon by other players. Instead of choosing to remain an environment they’ve deemed hostile towards them, they instead create communities of their own where players can discuss their playstyles, free from criticism.



An islander standing next to a large star fragment tree, a popular item in the hacking community.

Escapism

A look into a prolonged discussion about the game between users will reveal much about the general perception of this game by the community. But the most common concept observed throughout each of our observations was that of escapism. Seldom is it mentioned explicitly, but one might expect to regularly find a user discussing how the game has put them in a better mental state than they were before it. Mentions of eased anxiety, relaxation, and being able to “escape from reality” and all point to Animal Crossing having a therapeutic on its user base. This, compounded with the COVID-19 pandemic, has likely driven users to delve deeper within the community and to play the game and with far greater frequency. Users have been seen mentioning total playtimes surpassing 800 hours, with many saying that they would not have invested as much time in the game were it not for their quarantine.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews

We had the opportunity to interview six individuals who play Animal Crossing. Reid was a member of a sizable ACNH server, and Bonnie we found through the AC subreddit. We met Mara and Noah through a Discord server that partially focused on the hacking underground of Animal Crossing, both of whom served as moderators or server supporters. Bailey and Olivia were contacted through a smaller Discord server of only 50 members that Bailey created after Dodo Code sharing often on the social media platform Tumblr.

When asked how and when they first became involved in the Animal Crossing games, most cited purchasing the game because of a friend who had recommended it. Reid and Bonnie played the original Animal Crossing, and all six participants played Animal Crossing: New Leaf (ACNL), and ACNH. Though she started with ACNL, Olivia at some point before ACNH's release purchased and played a prior game in the series, Animal Crossing: Wild World (ACWW).

Interests & Activities

The most popular in-game activity that participants discussed were the collecting features of the game; players are encouraged to find fish, bugs, art, DIY

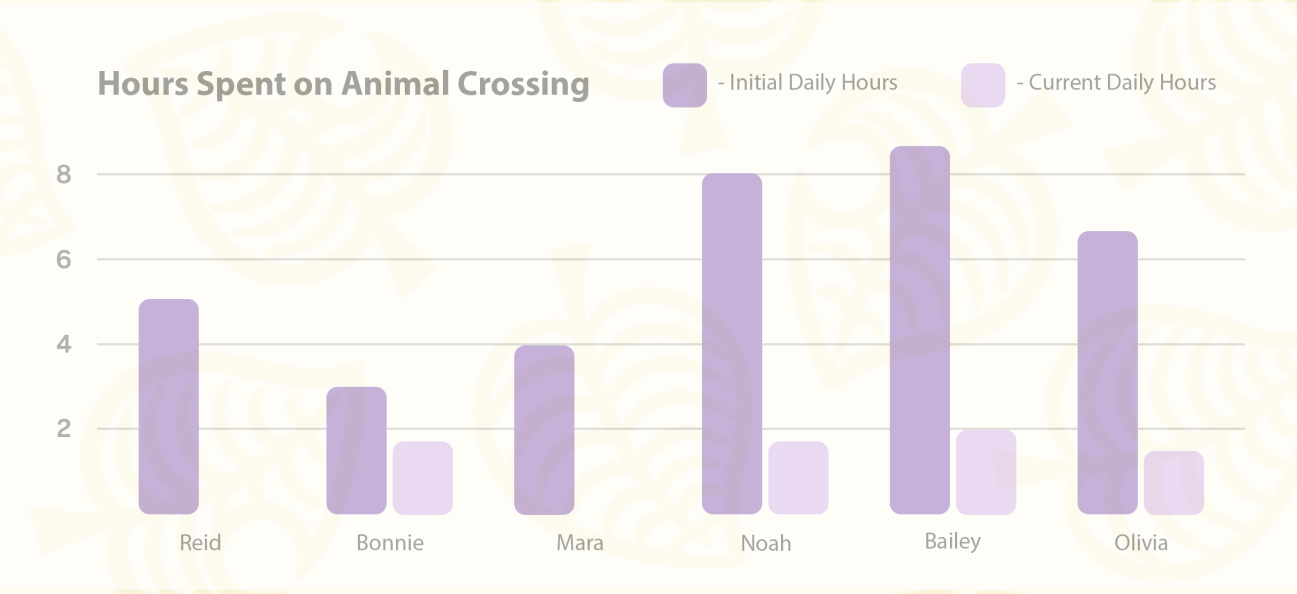
recipes, and catalog furniture as they play through the game. This appealed particularly to Bonnie, Bailey, and Noah, the latter of whom discussed in further detail how the required structure of getting on at certain hours to catch a particular bug or fish heightened their gameplay experience. This feature is constantly evolving to keep players' attention, as new DIYs, catalog furniture, and creatures have been added to the game as recently as early July.

Also valued by the players was the in-game socialization possible with a Nintendo Online subscription, which had been purchased by all six participants, hinting at the later-discovered significance of community to ACNH players. Bailey and Olivia ranked visiting friends as one of their favorite activities; Bailey first created their Discord server because of how often they opened their gates to allow visitors onto their island. However, this feature was mentioned by all participants during their interviews for different reasons. Reid only purchased the Online subscription recently, but enjoyed using it to play with his girlfriend. Bonnie, Noah, Bailey, and Olivia all socialized frequently with their friends through ACNH. Mara, the hacking server moderator, used this feature only to supervise trades and in-game events the server would host for its

Overall, island visits seem to be a widely used feature in the game.

We asked about each participants' daily gameplay and received similar answers across the board: hours spent on ACNH have plummeted since the game's initial release (footnote). Noah, Bailey, and Olivia each reported playing upwards of six hours a day on average when they first bought the game, and Bonnie played an average of three hours each day. Those four participants now play less than averaged two hours daily. Reid began by playing one to two hours a day, which increased to five or six daily hours once he began time-traveling. However, he has now stopped playing altogether. Reid explained that he

felt as though he had completed everything he wanted to and did not feel an urge to continue. Mara was an interesting case: she played three to four hours daily at first, but stopped playing soon there-after because she thought the game was too under-developed and did not have enough of its popular features. She is waiting for the game to update further before playing again.



Social Pressures

When asked about social pressures they experience in-game (if any), participants gave us a range of responses. Reid and Bonnie acknowledged the potential existence of pressures, but said they were unaffected by them because they were not showing their island to others (Reid) or because of her strong-willed nature. Olivia admitted to feeling pressured because islands are so much easier to share in this installment of the series. Mara and Noah had no such issues, and attributed that to the hacking community they were a part of. As Noah stated, “The [hacking] community deals with different play styles of all kinds in the game, while others look down on it, mostly time-traveling or hacked items in the game...We accept it and there’s more people to talk to about it.” Mara echoed the same thoughts in her own interview

Effects of COVID-19

As with most questions, we received several different answers about how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their experience with ACNH. Mara, who works in a hospital, seemed adaptable about the severe circumstances: “If it wasn’t COVID, it’d be something else, you know?” Bonnie and Noah did not see much potential change in their gameplay from the virus and its consequences, but saw benefits to it being a distraction at such a difficult time. The virus had a larger impact on the others. For Reid, quarantine made the game’s “island getaway” aspect more appealing, and he used the game to cope with the

“void” created by COVID-19. Olivia spent many hours on the game due to her inability to go outside, worsened by her status as high risk. Bailey withdrew from school due to the virus, unable to complete their classes online, so they spent much of their day playing the game, enjoying the evolving nature of the game when their quarantined life was at a standstill.

Emotional Impact

One significant area of interest was the emotional impact of ACNH on its players: what did it make them feel, and why did they want to continue playing? For most, it was the aspect of escapism, partially fueled by the context of COVID-19. Reid said that the fantasy of outside living appealed to him due to quarantine, and he enjoyed collecting items and decorating, stopping his gameplay only when the game began to feel like a “chore simulator.” As Bonnie mentioned, “Animal Crossing is easy when life is hard.” For her, the game felt safe, as if nothing could harm her there. Bailey echoed this thought but added that the game let them relax and be as they wanted on their own pace. Self-expression added a layer to the game’s emotional impact for them, as they played their game as an extension of themselves. Not having to pick a gender when they first opened the game was significant for Bailey, who has openly identified as non-binary for over a year. We also saw this excitement about personal customization in other areas; as someone with concerns about the real-world environment’s current state, Bailey chose to

limit their terraforming and instance build on top of what was already there. Flowers run wild on their island, and they have tried to impact the island as little as possible to reflect their care for the Earth.

Community Significance

When participants were answering the questions about emotional impact, we received some unexpected answers as well. Noah said that while the game was great, it was a fairly neutral experience to them; instead, it was the community that elevated their engagement and excitement about the game. We saw hints of this throughout our other interviews: Bailey and Olivia, for instance, were both involved in ACNH communities and found joy in that. Bailey specifically liked the close-knit Discord server that they created, which has only 50 or so members, because of its difference in quality compared to other ACNH communities. They were shocked by the amount of kindness shown on their server and on their island, which did not match other attempts at socialization on ACNH (such as an attempt to share their dodo code on the AC subreddit, which resulted in a poor experience).

Mara gave us a unique perspective in this regard. As mentioned previously, she stopped playing the game altogether shortly after its release because of its lacking features. However, she still serves as a moderator for an ACNH Discord server that specializes in hacked items. Why? She says she had a blast hosting events and giving back to people.

Like Bailey, Mara saw differences between different ACNH communities, but her distinction was between servers that banned hacked items versus ones that promoted hacked items. The “regular” AC communities are toxic in her opinion, focusing on how the game should be played and overcharging for everything. The hacking community is more helpful with each other, and the mods are continually thinking about how they can give back to their members. This is something Noah echoed, who is from the same hacking-friendly ACNH server, stating that the community is generous and kind to each other. The game felt neutral to Noah, but the community made the game more valuable to him.

ANALYSIS

Analysis

Through reviewing our data from contextual research, observations, and interviews, we came to our most significant conclusion: Animal Crossing, at the heart of things, is a community. Time and time again we saw mentions that though the game itself was a positive presence in users' lives, they would not have had the same experience without the socializing aspects in and out of the game. For users like Olivia and Bailey, the community heightened their enjoyment in a way that kept them engaged and promoted positivity in their interactions. For others like Mara, the community was so incredibly significant that it meant more to them than the game did, continuing to participate long after the game had been turned off for the last time.

This sense of community was more significant in its impact due to COVID-19, which put many individuals around the world into quarantine. Socializing within the game provided a form of escapism from a reality in which socializing in-person was not common anymore. We believe the context of the pandemic is what drove Nintendo Switch and ACNH sales so high, to the point where the Nintendo Switch console was impossible to find in early summer between high demand

and COVID-related shortages ⁴. In a game series where its best-selling installment prior to 2020 sold less than 4 million copies in its first six weeks, ACNH's sales of over 13 million copies in its first six weeks is staggering ⁵. However, this aligns with what we heard from interview subjects: in a world that is currently restricted to the indoors and no large gatherings, a game about island living and widespread socializing could not have come at a better time.

In fact, COVID-19 led to higher occurrences of certain types of interactions than would have normally occurred. Events such as birthday parties and graduation ceremonies have commonly been celebrated on ACNH as a replacement for in-person gatherings ⁶, and one of our researchers had her own birthday party on the game in early April. Beyond that, COVID-19 has brought waves of grief as well, as many are mourning for lost family members and are unable to gather to mourn together. Though we did not see evidence of this in our observation sessions, likely due to its rarity, our contextual research showed that some have even taken to building gravesites or hosting funerals to mourn a death in the community ⁷. So while Animal Crossing is indeed a community, that community can present itself

4. Ben Gilbert, "How big of a deal is 'Animal Crossing' ? It had the biggest launch of any Nintendo Switch game, including 'Mario' and 'Zelda.' ," last modified May 7, 2020, <https://www.>

in many different ways and for very different purposes.

Also noted was the enjoyment of self-expression opportunities in ACNH. In a game where the player can decorate almost every aspect of their island—their town tune, interior decor, exterior furnishings, clothing, flag design, and more—each player is able to make their island and character exactly as they wanted them ⁸. This led to a myriad of design choices, as seen in our observations of a server's channel for island layouts. Island themes ranged from cottages to fairylands to urban cities to post-apocalyptic deserts, and character themes were just as varied. This can lead to its own effects within socialization: players can participate in costume parties or fashion contests, as seen in one server, but landing on an island with an outfit that represents the individual can

lead to engaging conversations and closer bonding if those that see it can relate to it or take entertainment from it.

The last commonality we saw was a need for control within the game, which we saw expressed in a variety of ways: time-traveling, hacking, modding, and restarting islands were some common methods for this. Time-traveling is the most common of these, and it can be controversial depending on who you speak to. As one article explained, there are pros and cons to time-traveling, from the perk of getting things done faster to the consequence of burning out easier ⁹. And it does indeed seem that burnout is something experienced by many players, especially those who time-travel, as evidenced by the daily gameplay data we collected from our six interview participants.

5. Nintendo Co., Ltd., "Fiscal Year Ended March 2020: Financial Results Explanatory Material," last modified May 7, 2020, https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2020/200507_4e.pdf.

6. Andrew Whalen, "People Are Having Their Birthday Parties in 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons' to Maintain Social Distancing," last modified April 2, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/>

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CONCLUSION

Through our research, we have identified several meanings Animal Crossing users have ascribed to the game. We recognize that many look to the game as a chance to indulge in escapism. Because the game was released at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, it quickly became a vital part of the self-care routines of some users. It provided users with a diversion from the realities of living through a global pandemic. Further, it became an outlet of self-expression where they could self-actualize. Not bound by real-life constraints, users are able to express themselves through appearance, gender (or lack thereof), hobbies, and music in ways they have not achieved before. In Animal Crossing, many users see a world in which they can defy time, terraform cliffs and create waterfalls with only a shovel, find invaluable fossils often and build rapport with adorable animals. This level of control is unmatched in their everyday lives. Above all, we found that community was the most important aspect of Animal Crossing to its users. While some of the users had other goals, most participants of our study sought solace and comfort in playing AC with their family, real life friends, and acquaintances they have met in-game and in its related communities. For some users, ACPH was returning home after a long journey. To others, it was an opportunity to make new friends and broaden their horizons.



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