

COCONUTS, CUSTOM-PLAY, & COVID-19: SOCIAL ISOLATION, SERIOUS LEISURE, AND PERSONAS IN *ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Animal Crossing: New Horizons' (ACNH) release during the COVID-19 pandemic, and draws upon responses from nearly 2000 players to frame how the game acts as a platform for routine substitution and social connectivity in a disconnected physical world. A combination of the game's elements, including its comforting aesthetic, participatory community, financial mechanics, and goal-setting, promotes the player's construction of their sense of self and provides crucial stability. In contrast to other life simulator games such as The Sims, the timing of ACNH's release makes its substitution efforts more adoptable by a wide spectrum of players between casual and hardcore sensibilities.

Moreover, the game substitutes some complex face-to-face interactions during self-isolation and it affords stability and routine through a simulacrum of real-life, however exaggerated and narrowed in scope. The gameplay provides player agency and self-determination of playstyle as well as routines that contrast with the intense disruption of the everyday by the pandemic. Players' shared affinities and engagement with the game function as a form of serious leisure which in turn creates personas from a diverse range of roles such as, the social player, the turnip trader, the gardener, the artisan. The persona roles enable players to adopt multiple recognisable specialisations within an expansive social environment. In essence, players of ACNH create an array of malleable, interchangeable gaming personas that successfully embody the routine and social play forcibly absent from real life during the pandemic.

KEY WORDS

Animal Crossing; COVID-19; Persona Studies; Serious Leisure

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the 2020 video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH)*, and how it aided players as a method of routine substitution and self-expression during the COVID-19 pandemic. In part, this substitution and self-expression has been accomplished through the emergence of specific player *personas*, arising through social and solitary play – much of it undertaken to a degree of *serious leisure* – and exemplified through in-game tasks. The game affords significant freedom to players through the means available to them to seek gratification, with guided objectives for the central gameplay path alongside options for further play that the

player can choose to pursue. This freedom, coupled with the lack of any in-game condition for failure, has contributed to the game's incredible popularity during the early stages of the pandemic, and the resultant lockdowns across the world, between March and July 2020. *ACNH* allowed players to reinstall a sense of daily routine – thanks to the game's timebound affordances – and social connection, through both the game's multiplayer modes and the expansive social media communities surrounding it, during a period of mandatory social distancing.

I come to this research as both an observer and a player, having played the game since shortly after its release and for much of the lockdown period under study. My initial interest in exploring the game's uses during the pandemic arose from finding it personally useful as a substitute for many of my lost daily routines, its appeal further bolstered by the game's charming, brightly-coloured aesthetic. Heartened by the positive effect the game has had on me during the disruption of COVID-19, I seek to unpack the reasons behind this by examining other players' experiences. In doing so, a sample of international players (n=1898) gave me their perspectives on their experiences playing *ACNH* during the COVID-19 lockdown period from March to July 2020. The players provided insight into how the game works as a stabilising agent for upended routines, and as a place for players to assume a variety of roles – both of which intersect through analysing the personas crafted by the players' respective game experiences. To analyse *ACNH*, its use as substitution for everyday routines, and the resultant personas emerging from this substitution, players were asked to discuss their experiences in these terms. Many of their responses illustrate how the open-ended nature of the game's playstyles and the participatory communities surrounding the game afforded both comfort and reliability during the social upheaval of the pandemic. These responses also highlight how the creation and malleability of *ACNH* personas allow players to choose their roles – and, potentially, move between roles when mood and circumstances elicit. In contrast to Richard Bartle's taxonomy of player categories (1996), this study is interested in the roles players create for themselves, rather than those that the game's design elicits and facilitates.

This paper involves two key areas of inquiry: the routine substitution for players enabled through serious leisure, and the resultant emergence of *ACNH* gameplay personas. My study recruited its respondents from Twitter (including via the #AnimalCrossing and #AnimalCrossingNewHorizons hashtags), Reddit (through the r/AnimalCrossing and r/AnimalCrossingNewHorizons subreddits) and Facebook (through public and private groups including "Animal Crossing: New Horizons Over 25's Club", "Animal Crossing New Horizons: Cottage Core" and "ACNH Island Life", among others). Other respondents approached the research via word-of-mouth by fellow respondents, and I also ran an occasional blog (www.animalcrossingresearchproject.wordpress.com) that provided insight into key areas of the project and invited prospective respondents to fill out the survey. Respondents were asked to answer a quantitative and qualitative survey regarding their experiences playing *ACNH* during lockdown. To maintain ethical integrity given the sensitive nature of the pandemic and its impact on mental health, respondents were given a chance to exit the survey prior to completing it, and no questions (besides the confirmation of being over 18 years old) required mandatory answers. Players were asked questions such as the length of time they had spent with the game thus far, how often they had played during the pandemic, whether they preferred solitary or social play, and what roles they most enjoyed embodying. The latter could include any number of selections, incorporating the in-game activities (such as fishing, bug-hunting, and fruit and flower growing) and roles primarily associated with them (such as a fisher, a collector, and a gardener, respectively). Players were also prompted to qualitatively unpack their experiences: what they had found most valuable about the game during the lockdown, would

they still have played if it were not for the lockdown, and whether there were instances where the game provided them with the ability to substitute their daily routines – disrupted by the pandemic – with in-game activities. The survey was influenced by previous studies of gamer social behavior such as Oskar Milik’s exploration of persona construction through multiplayer gaming (2017), and Ji Soo Lim’s study of gamers’ prosocial and empathic in-game behaviours (2019).

TIME SPENT PLAYING	NUMBER OF PLAYERS	PERCENTAGE
Less than 50 hours	15	0.79%
Between 51 and 100 hours	65	3.43%
Between 101 and 150 hours	96	5.06%
Between 151 and 200 hours	155	8.18%
Between 201 and 300 hours	328	17.30%
Between 301 and 400 hours	329	17.35%
Between 401 and 500 hours	273	14.40%
More than 500 hours	635	33.49%
Total number of question respondents	1896	100%

Figure 1. Amount of time respondents had spent playing *ACNH*. A total of 2 players did not answer this question.

HOW FREQUENTLY ACNH WAS PLAYED DURING THE LOCKDOWN	NUMBER OF PLAYERS	PERCENTAGE
I have rarely played ACNH, if ever, during lockdown	0	0%
I have played ACNH infrequently during lockdown	24	1.27%
I have played ACNH at least two or three times a week during lockdown	79	4.16%

I have played ACNH most days each week during lockdown	353	18.61%
I have played ACNH almost every day during lockdown	1441	75.96%
Total number of question respondents	1897	100%

Figure 2. Frequency that respondents had spent playing *ACNH* during lockdown. Only 1 player did not answer this question.

As noted in Figure 1, the vast majority of this study's 1898 respondent players have spent hundreds of hours with the game: 1565 players played more than 200 hours and 635 went beyond 500 hours. By contrast, 331 players played for fewer than 200 hours, and only 15 played less than 50 hours. The time played factor demonstrates that the results represent a heavily-invested player base, rather than a predominantly casual one, an observation which is corroborated by many of the qualitative responses I garnered. While the experiences of occasional play during periods of COVID-19-enforced lockdown is an aspect that was of interest to this research and did garner a few responses, the overwhelming number of respondents who noted having played almost or every day during the early lockdown of March to July 2020 – totaling 1794 players – (Figure 2), means this study focuses on players who integrated *ACNH* into their daily routines.

THE RELEASE OF *ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS* AND THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) was released worldwide for the Nintendo Switch gaming system on March 20, 2020, and is the fifth “main” video game title of the *Animal Crossing* series. The franchise, which began in 2001 with its eponymous first game on the Nintendo GameCube, encompasses seven additional games: four more in the “main series” and three spin-offs. An immediate boon of *Animal Crossing* is its predominantly portable nature, with four games released on Nintendo handheld consoles – the DS, 3DS and Switch – and a fifth released on the iPhone and Android app stores, allowing most of the *Animal Crossing* games to transcend the restrictions of fixed locations as part of the franchise's multiplayer experience.

ACNH is a real-time life simulator, set on a deserted island where the player character is tasked with turning the island into a beautiful, thriving community for its in-game residents and for other players to visit. There are specific questlines given by the island's owner, anthropomorphised racoon Tom Nook, that enable the player to understand the essential elements of the game through paying off an immense debt, owed to Nook, for the player's home. Otherwise, it is largely left to the player to determine self-set goals for gameplay gratification and feedback loops, including the aesthetics and material goods that will be deployed on the island, and the location of the island's shops and homes.

In terms of day-to-day gameplay, *ACNH* affords significant freedom, allowing the player to choose their preferred activities to aestheticise the island and earn the in-game currency – Bells – needed to support it. Examples of such activities include cleaning up seashells, planting and harvesting fruit trees and flowers, buying and selling items and clothing at the in-game stores, and depositing saved Bells in an in-game bank account periodically accruing modest interest payments. Beyond the central goal of developing the island, *ACNH's* flexible gameplay

allows players to choose their own pathways towards gratification. If a player wished, they could forestall the island development quest indefinitely in favour of a range of other activities, including cross-breeding flowers to create new colour arrangements, fishing, bug-catching, fossil collecting, and clothing design. Some of these activities can aid the financial aspect of the game's central island goal, thereby contributing to *Animal Crossing's* ongoing focuses on materialism and consumption that have been key parts of the franchise (Bogost 2007, pp. 267-275). By contrast, many other activities can be freely pursued as pastimes with yet more player-set goals within the game. The majority of these activities are mundane, and show successful gamification of otherwise laborious tasks, representing "game-labour dialectics" that each player enters into as a condition of play to garner "immaterial satisfaction...by material activities" (Kim 2014, p. 363).

Upon release, the game received acclaim for balancing game-based objectives and player agency. Given the existing positive reception to the franchise, *ACNH* likely would have still succeeded if it had been released at any other time. However, many critics and players assert that its specific release during the COVID-19 pandemic is the driving force for its immense popularity. The game arrived as lockdowns were in preparation or full effect in many countries, keeping players at home and physically distanced. The Nintendo Switch's portability gave the game a potent vector for being materially successful; the game could be played anywhere, helping to facilitate easier, ongoing engagement, especially for those living in houses with multiple Switch consoles or limited access to screens. With its social focus, cute aesthetic, and provision of both guided objectives and player-set goals (reminiscent of other successful life simulator games, such as *Harvest Moon*, *The Sims* and *Stardew Valley*), *ACNH* quickly became a game to be played during a homebound lockdown, a facet brought up in many critical reviews and subsequent publications:

Nintendo could not possibly have picked a better time than during a global pandemic to release this latest entry [where] your biggest decision is whether to go fishing or bug hunting. (Biggs 2020).

...there is something about the particular escapism of [*ACNH*]'s simple life that feels particularly vital at a time when death tolls and infection rates are rising, whole cities are shutting down, the global economy is fumbling to a halt and millions of people are choosing to spend their days indoors, alone. (Thier2020).

Similar sentiments are echoed in reviews from *IGN* (Plagge 2020), *Game Informer* (Cork 2020), *Ars Technica* (Machkovech 2020), *Polygon* (Frushtick 2020) and *The Guardian* (MacDonald 2020). *The New York Times'* Imad Khan (2020) called *ACNH* "the game for the coronavirus moment", citing its open-ended gameplay and lack of deadlines as crucial to its success, asserting:

With the world in the grip of a pandemic, [this is] exactly the sort of escape that has captivated so many... *Animal Crossing* doesn't have an end and can be played indefinitely – which is especially prescient when there's no deadline to the current crisis. This pace bestows on the game a level of calmness, one that gives the player total control over progression.

The game's freedom of progression is routinely cited as an advantage by respondents. Many of them discuss how that freedom prompts them towards enacting their agency of play, rather than being predominantly guided by the game. One participant encapsulates this when they say that, for them, "it was the ability to have control over the aspects of my in-game life

when I didn't have control over my actual life during lockdown.” Another participant cites the game as “a world of positivity and serenity in a time where things are frightening, violent, and uncertain” and that they “take solace in the small escape when I want to unwind after working long hours.”

Connected to this freedom is the game’s distinct lack of rules-imposed fail states. Unlike other games that encourage learning through failure and negative feedback loops (Koster 2004), *ACNH* is largely devoid of this. There is no way to play the game incorrectly from the perspective of its embedded rules. Characters do not die or lose lives, as in first-person shooters or platform games; no challenges need to be completed in a certain timeframe – although there are optional timed social events for occasions such as Easter and Mother’s Day; and there is no failure that resets part of the game or sends the player to the beginning of a challenge or puzzle. The only sense of “failure” is self-imposed, particularly if a player has set themselves a challenge involving daily mechanics. For example, in-game residents can be spoken to by the player’s character for a friendship boost once per day and should there be a resident with whom the player is keen on maintaining a good friendship, missing their daily appointment could constitute a “failure” in this way. By contrast, the ur-example of the life simulator genre, *The Sims*, is a more realistic game that can have player characters lose their jobs, their romantic relationships, and in drastic cases, even their lives. No equivalent fail-state or negative feedback loop exists in *ACNH*.

The game’s leisurely pace, lack of failure, and ability to choose gratification pathways have created an immersive gaming experience. Most of this study’s respondents’ experiences aligns with Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä’s definitions of *sensory* and *imaginative immersion* (2011, pp. 101-102). The game’s aesthetic, able to attract players of all ages, provides a colourful, innocent audiovisual tableau that envelops many players by providing an appealing alternative to the harsh realities of the pandemic, allowing the player to “[become] entirely focused on the game world and its stimuli” (p. 101). Concurrently, the emphases on social play, escapism, self-determination, and connection with in-game residents creates empathic bonds within the game, prompting the player towards “[using] their imagination, [empathizing] with the characters, or just [enjoying] the fantasy of the game” (p. 102). *ACNH* is a soothing, welcome experience, bereft of failure and replete with opportunities for stability, comfort, and leisurely play.

KEY THEORIES: SERIOUS LEISURE AND THE PERSONA

This paper examines the enacting of social practices and the simulacra of real life in *ACNH*, both of which are enabled by players’ *serious leisure* habits. First coined in 1982 by sociologist Robert Stebbins, serious leisure refers to leisure activities undertaken by passionate practitioners who engage in pursuits that are appealing for their “complexity and many challenges”, while simultaneously receiving usually “no remuneration at all” for their expertise (Stebbins 2001, p. 54). Those who engage in a serious leisure habit approach their activity usually for no greater reward than “fulfilling one’s human potential, expressing one’s skills and knowledge, having cherished experiences, and developing a valued identity” (Stebbins 2001, p. 54). Stebbins also contends serious leisure serves as a good stopgap for those lacking the routine provided by working life, “an appealing feature [for those] who must endure severely shortened workweeks or no work at all” (2001, p. 56). Those who adhere to a serious leisure practice can find the absence of routine sated by that practice: to apply Stebbins’ overall contention to *ACNH*, many of its serious leisure practitioners who “miss the routine of the full-time job...can find satisfying equivalents in a great variety of serious leisure pursuits” (2001, p. 56).

In discussing such pursuits, we can also use the *persona*, an analytical tool that best encapsulates *ACNH*'s serious leisure nexus of player-set goals, choice of gameplay styles, and role assumption. According to Milik, the persona can be used for "analysis of the region of social interaction that lies between the character and the player, but includes the actions of both" (2017, p. 67). The modern conceptualisation of the persona relies on the interconnection between the player and technology as a "technologically mediated but naturalised identity that we inhabit individually and collectively" (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p.2). As a flexible term, we can understand the persona in the context of video gaming as a collection of elements regarding the player's navigation both within the game itself, and within communities of play that surround the game. In their definition of the term, P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore, and Kim Barbour (2020) note that the persona is "a projection and performance of individuality [and] a way to negotiate one's self into various collectives" (p. 3). Using personas to understand gaming specifically is also quite apposite, given the understanding of many player-character interactions involving an interplay of values, goals, and embodiment that bridge the character's virtual game-world and the player's physical reality (Gee 2008). A persona analysis of *ACNH* thus incorporates the perspectives engendered for and by the player and the character they create, discerning the interconnection between both frames of reference, and maps the ways that players have negotiated the game through assuming roles on individual and collective levels. An understanding of *ACNH* play through persona goes beyond seeing the player's character as a simple avatar that "conjures presence" within the game (Coleman 2011, p. 117), and more as an extension of the player that "exists and persists external to those individual game instances" (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 158).

Both serious leisure and the persona will be explored in this research as concomitant: the habits and activities developed by *ACNH* players lead to identity formations that move between the in-game and out-of-game experiences of those players during the pandemic.

SUBSTITUTION AND STABILITY

The key aspect initially drawing me to both the game and this project, is *ACNH*'s function as a substitute for routine during the upheaval of the pandemic, especially during the time many players have spent in periods of lockdown. What appealed most to me as a player was implementing routine based on the game's mechanics, because my daily patterns – take the train to work, leave the office for lunch, swing by for groceries on the way home – were eroded by the lockdown. *ACNH* has several features built into its real-time functions encouraging a sense of routine: for example, each day, only a certain number of fossils can be dug up, the clothing and general stores open and close at respective times, and the purchase of certain items and clothing elicits the player waiting until the next day for them to arrive via in-game mail. Given this focus on time and the routine of its features, *ACNH* became, for me, an ideal stopgap for the loss of my daily cycles. I instilled a ritual of logging on before starting my work day at home, visiting the stores for new items, and taking a quick tour around my island to find fossils and harvest my fruit trees on every second or third day. I followed this with a similar routine after work, where I took the time to speak with my in-game residents, tidy up my beach, make any last-minute purchases before the stores close, and perhaps craft items and resources to continue aestheticising my island. The ritual of *ACNH*'s timebound mechanics gives an ongoing sense of regularity and stability that was significantly effective during lockdown, and a key motivation for me to continue playing.

MOTIVATION	PRIMARY MOTIVATION (NUMBER OF PLAYERS)	SECONDARY MOTIVATION (NUMBER OF PLAYERS)	PRIMARY MOTIVATION (PERCENTAGE OF PLAYERS)	SECONDARY MOTIVATION (PERCENTAGE OF PLAYERS)
The ability to express myself	356	400	18.85%	21.13%
The daily routine of tasks and maintenance	624	438	33.03%	23.14%
The social play aspects (including engaging with players through social media)	293	460	15.51%	24.30%
The cute aesthetic	432	449	22.87%	23.72%
Gameplay loops	21	63	1.11%	3.33%
Playing the turnip market	5	13	0.26%	0.69%
Other	158	70	8.36%	3.70%
Total number of question respondents	1889	1893	100%	100%

Figure 3. Motivation factors for gameplay. A total of 9 players did not provide their primary motivation, while 5 players did not provide their secondary motivation.

Many respondents had a similar experience. When asked what their primary motivation for play was, a majority response from 624 players – roughly one-third of the sample – stated it was “the daily routine of tasks and maintenance”, while a further 438 players listed this as their secondary motivation for play (Figure 3). Almost every player detailed having an in-game routine of some kind, usually related to similar activities that my routine entailed, and some even noted the game’s routines provided more stability during lockdown than the regular routines of their work lives. Despite these routines largely involving *Animal Crossing’s* gamified mundane activities, such as flower-picking and cleaning (Kim 2014, p. 363), and thus contrasting with Stebbins’ contention that serious leisure is largely embraced for its complexity (Stebbins 2001, p. 54), those routines reinforced ongoing stability for players. Judging by respondents, this stability proved crucial, especially to those who suffered hardship during the lockdown, whether it be losing their job, experiencing anxiety and adverse mental health, or someone they knew being afflicted with COVID-19. One respondent summed this up neatly in saying that, for them, the best part of the game is “the ability to have control over the aspect of my in game life when I didn’t have control over my actual life during lockdown,” while another

explained in detail on how the game's routine replacement had a profoundly positive effect on their mental health:

I struggle without a routine and suffer with anxiety and depression. During lockdown, I've had something to do because I threw myself into maintaining my island, and designing various aspects. We had a short period where I couldn't play due to my Switch breaking, and during that week-long period I had the worst bout of depression I've experienced to date. With the cycle of routine, either virtual or real, I've found I can cope more easily with anxiety triggers - social interaction being a huge one. I've not been as conscious [of my anxiety] when I've had people visit the island, and have actually spoken more to people through the game than I do in reality.

In similar veins, many other respondents noted the escapist benefits of the game and the thriving community that surrounds it:

I have anxiety and depression, and one of the most important parts of [ACNH] for me is interacting with the villagers. If I don't have the mental energy to talk to people or if they're stressing me out, it's nice to have your villagers come up and compliment you and what not. You get "social" interaction without having to socialize. I also have a super high stress job (Deputy Director of a rape crisis/domestic violence organization), so after a day of dealing with the absolute worst the world has to offer, it is so helpful to be able to get lost in a little fictional paradise. I have heard the same from other professionals.

During lockdown, [ACNH] was a means of escape. The best we could do is go outside in our own yards, so this game helped with a sense of escapism. It also helped once all of our protests in the US started to take my mind off my anxiety about friends and family getting injured or killed during them.

I consider myself not a very social person and quite introverted but during lockdown I did feel isolated and sad because I lost my job but [ACNH] made me happy and really helped me through quarantine. Having the social interaction with others through trading and exploring their island for design ideas for my own island was so much fun to me.

The game also provided an alternative location for traditional rituals that have taken or were supposed to take place during lockdown, with some respondents noting their first- and second-hand experiences:

I've seen other players make memorials for loved ones they've lost due to COVID-19 when they have been unable to have a proper funeral. It's heartbreaking.

My fiancé and I were due to get married at the end of May, but our wedding was sadly postponed until 2021 due to COVID-19. On what should have been our wedding day, we hosted an ACNH wedding instead. Our friends attended as guests and one friend acted as minister, and read vows (via chat) that we repeated. It was a nice little touch on a day that was really tough to get through. We even had a random person from an ACNH Facebook group attend to take pictures!

On our anniversary during lockdown we bought new clothes and got dressed up, went to the museum and the cafe and exchanged presents in game.

Serious leisure immediately explains some of the most ardent sectors of *ACNH*'s fandom, with players, including many of the participants of this research, devoting upwards of 500 hours of play, clearly embodying much of the passionate enthusiasm Stebbins describes. However, as noted by David Scott, there can be gradations of seriousness within recreational specialisations, demonstrating a “continuum of involvement [with] several different types of casual and serious participants” that are nonetheless united by social drivers keeping them all motivated together, at different levels of involvement, in pursuit of their serious leisure activity (2012, p. 369). This means that even those who could be said to be more “casual” *ACNH* players, compared to 500+ hours players, can still have their activities articulated by serious leisure explanations, particularly through Stebbins’ contentions of rewards that included cherished experiences and developing an identity.

Perceiving *ACNH* through a serious leisure lens frames the game as an intimate, personal, and social space where varying degrees of enthusiastic play – and, in this case, play that occurs during a pandemic lockdown – enable self-given in-game goals to provide the player ongoing gratification. *ACNH*'s activities can grant positive mental health benefits, a factor endemic in gaming as a whole (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014), which are compounded by the psychologically-constructive and empowering qualities gained through immersion in serious leisure activities (Dieser, Christenson and Davis-Gage, 2015). Both aspects result in improved mental health for many players. The absence of physical social interaction due to the lockdown encourages social players to seek alternatives for connection with other players through the game and its attendant social media communities, whilst the more solitary players are provided with in-game tasks that provide fulfilling activities for them to pursue on their own. Both motivations fulfill Stebbins’ contention that serious leisure can, in part, be seen as “behavioural expressions of [the practitioner’s] central life interests” (2001, p. 56).

***ACNH* PLAYER IDENTITY THROUGH ACTIVITIES, ROLES, COLLABORATION**

Arising during COVID-19’s social upheaval, the gameplay personas of *ACNH* – reliant on their serious leisure activities both in- and out-of-game – emerge as a confluence of player and character enacting tasks to serve the empathic needs of both. James Paul Gee discusses the overlap between character and player in gaming as an important hybridised relationship, where players imbue the character with personal values and goals while assuming the in-game values and goals given to them by the character (2008, pp. 258-260). In *ACNH*, this relationship is in full effect. The character in-game must establish the island as attractive for tourists and cozy for residents, while the player implements structure in undertaking the tasks that, in order to maintain play, must result in emotional satisfaction. Concurrently, social activities outside the game include interactions on social media, creation of fan-made content (such as artwork), and development of fan-made player aids (such as guides to the turnip market, *ACNH*'s equivalent of a weekly stock exchange, and the fashion creation minigame) are integral to understanding various *ACNH* player personas’ experiences.

The social dimensions of *ACNH* play necessitate a degree of empathy, especially with so many players connecting during an emotionally turbulent time. This kind of prosocial behaviour is an important effect of social gaming, similar to the positive effects gained through those who play Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games for social connection (Halbrook, O’Donnell and Msetfi 2019, p. 1098). That connection is bolstered through *ACNH*'s emphasis on player-to-player interactions, a factor that garners more player engagement with a video game than one favouring player-to-computer interactions (Ravaja *et al.* 2006). Although not every *ACNH* player is empathetic or prosocial, judging from respondents there is a propensity towards this

behaviour in the majority of the *ACNH* fandom. In discussing the switching between perceptual frames of player and character in video games, Lim (2019) analyses prosocial behaviour and empathy as important in determining how both frames affect gameplay and the connection between players-as-players and players-as-characters. Lim determines that certain games can “work as [effective agents] in teaching prosocial behaviors specifically motivated by emotional empathy or altruistic behavior” (2019, p. 15). Examining this overlap between player and character provides insight into *ACNH* gameplay preferences, and contextualising this through the lens of the persona allows us to better understand the relationship between players and gameplay “in terms of the subjective and objective properties of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman” (Moore 2020). Moreover, the serious leisure practices of *ACNH* players form a fundamental element of the personas that emerge: per Stebbins, “every serious leisure activity offers a major lifestyle and identity for its enthusiasts”, and that lifestyle and identity “can serve as solid substitutes for the ones they once knew in their work” (2001, p. 56). Whereas a player’s work or social identity may have been impinged or otherwise completely altered by the pandemic, *ACNH* offers identity formation through a serious leisure activity that can help mitigate, if not entirely replace, that impinging of identity.

The main tasks of the game – both those given by the game and chosen by the player – are seen in Figure 4 below:

ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF PLAYERS	PERCENTAGE OF PLAYERS
Total number of question respondents	1898	100%
Island maintenance (including cleaning the beach, weeds, adjusting island terrain)	1742	91.70%
Shopping at in-game stores	1676	88.30%
Engaging with in-game characters visiting the island	1624	85.56%
Collecting fossils and creatures for the in-game museum	1589	83.71%
Giving gifts/friendship boosts to in-game residents	1390	73.23%
Fishing	1267	66.75%
Visiting or being visited by real world players	1257	66.22%
Flower-growing	1211	63.80%
Building and creating items from in-game recipes (including furniture, tools and clothing)	1197	63.06%
Visiting randomized in-game islands through Nook Miles tickets	1170	61.64%
Activities that earn bells outside of the Turnip Market	1146	60.37%
Paying off housing and construction debts to Tom Nook	1142	60.16%
Designing the interior of the player’s house	1048	55.21%

Giving gifts to real world players	933	49.15%
Attempting to attract specific in-game residents to the island through prioritizing friendship boosts and gift-giving	901	47.47%
Buying/selling on the Turnip Market	745	39.25%
Growing and harvesting fruit trees	741	39.04%
Designing clothing	244	12.85%
Other	118	6.21%

Figure 4. Main tasks of the game, and the number of players who undertake them regularly. Respondents were permitted to choose multiple options.

The prolific number of tasks offers a range of roles for players, and several ways players can specialise their serious leisure practices. There is overlap between all of the activities, and none are considered mutually-exclusive for particular playstyles: someone preferring to grow flowers can, at any time, decide to design clothing or go fishing. I asked my respondents to consider what one kind of in-game role or identity, if any, they would align with predominantly. The results in Figure 5 detail these roles:

ROLE	NUMBER OF PLAYERS	PERCENTAGE OF PLAYERS
A gardener	147	7.76%
A designer	222	11.72%
A builder	108	5.70%
A collector	550	29.04%
A curator	87	4.59%
An explorer	208	10.98%
A decorator	366	19.32%
An economist	53	2.80%
A consumer	112	5.91%
Other	41	2.16%
Total	1894	100%

Figure 5. Main roles in the game. 4 players did not answer this question.

An interesting factor emerged for the respondents who chose “Other”. Some of them clarified existing roles they could have chosen: for example, a “collector” could instead be “a fisher” or “a bug-catcher”. Other respondents cited niche roles involving several tasks: for example, a “landlord” tasked with overall care of properties and tenants, or “a diplomat/ambassador” maintaining good relations with villagers while aestheticising their island. The remainder of “Other” respondents listed themselves as a “mix” of several playstyles. One of the benefits of *ACNH* personas is their malleability, given that the game does not lock you into one preferred mode of play. Such malleability allows significant overlap and portability

between roles and tasks, promoting an easy “*diversity* among participants involved in the *same leisure activity*” (Scott 2012, p. 370, original emphasis).

Another kind of overlap exists between the personas emerging from gameplay habits and engaging with social media communities. Many respondents reported their in-game tasks aided in deciding which sectors of the *ACNH* fandom they participated in beyond their own immediate friend groups. For example, one respondent set up a Discord server specifically to talk with fellow flower-growers, while another found a Facebook group that specifically creates social play opportunities. The reverse also occurred with survey participants joining community groups that then helped them discover what tasks they most enjoyed doing. Players found the agency of creating their own pathway for play satisfying and then tailored their communal experience around that satisfaction. This social aspect occurred within immediate communities of friends and family, and encompassed broader social media communities. *ACNH* personas within both broad and immediate communities also demonstrate many prosocial qualities, relying upon players’ shared affinities to encourage the sharing of information, skills, and resources for common purposes (Ito *et al.* 2019). Participants also used their persona as a certain type of *ACNH* player to navigate their communities as “members of a category of humankind who recognize each other” (Stebbins 2001, p. 56). Respondents reported the allure of gift-giving and donating to other players as holding significant appeal for them. For example, one player discussed searching in-game islands for a villager they desired, and upon mentioning this in passing in an *ACNH* Facebook group, they found that “random Facebook people gave [them] 50 Nook Miles Tickets so [they] could find the villager [they] wanted.” Other players have had similar prosocial experiences of their own as both recipient and instigator:

I visited this nice lady’s island and she had riches as far as I could see. She told me to fill my pockets with whatever I wanted. It was really fun. I’ve also very much enjoyed leaving gifts on my kids’ and husband’s door steps for them to find in the morning.

I stumbled into a small Discord group that formed early on (15-20 people) and we helped each other out with everything - Bells, items, Nook Miles Tickets, whatever. We threw each other birthday parties and even supported each other with real life stuff - family issues, heading back to work, etc. A little *ACNH* family.

I needed about nine more flowers to finish having every flower type, so I made a post on a Facebook [*ACNH*] page asking for help. Three girls came over and brought me a ton of flowers! They did it all without wanting anything in return!

Additionally, the collaborative nature of *ACNH* players leads to a kind of “co-creative labour” enacting “co-creativity” (Banks & Deuze 2009) through the exchanging of resources and information via players’ shared affinities. The *Animal Crossing* series has a history of encouraging player collaboration, interactivity, and creativity, embodied both inside and outside the game by players and player communities (Kim 2014). Several participants noted their interactions with other players led to fruitful in-game gains, such as brainstorming their island’s aesthetic design, and mutually assisting navigation of the turnip market. There were also gratifying real world effects that encouraged them to play more:

Having the chance to do an island tour on a popular Facebook gaming stream has really been the highlight for me....it was amazing to be able to show people what I've done and of course to interact more directly with the streamer and

audience. In general, the mutual sharing of design ideas, resources, tips & tricks, and design codes on social media has improved my 'quality of life' in the game and my ability to enjoy it as a player.

I had my Nooks Cranny shop buying turnips for [530 bells]...so I posted the Dodo Code to Twitter and I had a flood of people come over who were so kind about my island in the comments... Many people also left me very generous tips, I made about as much in tips that day as my own turnip earnings. I had a huge smile and feeling of elation for the rest of that day.

Though this study does not encapsulate the entirety of the *ACNH* player base, it does capture a sector of that player base whose experiences demonstrate the game as prosocial and communal, an environment that is welcoming, accessible, and, compared to reality, far more stable during the COVID-19 lockdown. These *ACNH* players demonstrate social gaming's capacity for helpful behaviours that translate into the real world through in-game collaboration and cooperation (Granic, Lobel & Engels 2014, p. 73). This communal environment exists as both a factor of play and a tangible, real world effect. One respondent summed it up appropriately:

The *ACNH* community is full of very kind, generous people. Always willing to help and give advice. It's a nice escape from the not-so-nice people IRL (in real life). I feel like *ACNH*, having the ability to choose who you interact with, being able to pay off your loans easily, having the ability to decorate your island and home as you please, is such a nice way to forget about how you can't do all of those things right now. It's the stability we all crave.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

We can perceive several *ACNH* personas emerging from play during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the participant survey examined in this article. The analysis has provided a prosopographic perspective: "a study of the personal" that encompasses "the various ways dress, documents, comportment and objects [establish] the relations of power and influence within a particular community" (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 7). Through this approach and based on the interactions highlighted here, we can see particular *ACNH* personas as prosocial, communally-minded, and agentic, performed by players who assist one another through material, virtual, and social means. The plethora of in-game activities impact the kinds of goals and communities with which players engage, shifting the way their public representation of play is understood through their islands, their playstyles, and their interactions with fellow players through social media.

The strictures of the lockdown curtailing the daily physical routines of work and social life have necessitated that players inflect their characters with more of their real selves, to mitigate these losses through the game's affordances. Milik characterises these as interactions where the player and character are a unified social construct that "projects certain identity features through language and behaviour" in an environment where "the character and the player occupy the same social space" (2017, p. 73). The players of *ACNH* understand one another through shared affinities, and the characters are seen as extensions of the players' selves rather than ones that are alternative to them. Moreover, *ACNH* personas compound some of the bleed-through effect of the player into the character: Milik analyses this in his use of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical understanding of the presentation of self (1959). Per Milik:

Identity theory argues...that regardless of how many identities we may have active as social beings, there is still seep-through between different identities, as they always present themselves in varying levels in an interaction. Even when an action may only happen in the virtual world, its consequences can impact the individual in the offline world as well... As the relationships created in an online setting, which are often based on anonymity, gradually become more intimate, more player identity features (i.e. motherhood, employment, abuse history) will become part of the character-identity conveyed to their online friends. As more of the player leaks into the character's interactions, *the character becomes a social actor with a real person behind them.* (2017, pp. 72-73, emphasis my own)

This last aspect of Milik's contention is paramount to understanding *ACNH's* personas. In effect, the personas use the game as a conduit for navigating the pandemic, with the character being an extension of the player's self under lockdown – a *social actor* virtually interacting through means that the player is physically, and usually geographically, prohibited from emulating, and doing so via serious leisure practices that accentuate these personas as active, connected, and committed.

Though still popular, *ACNH* was prominent with its players during the initial lockdown period from March to July 2020, the time this research covers. Judging by the wealth of responses I received from these 1898 respondents – many of which could not be included within the scope of this paper – there is more to discuss in terms of *ACNH's* specific personas that emerged due to the pandemic (in contrast to personas potentially emerging from the game *outside* of the pandemic), the enormous fan communities and practices that surround them, and the impact that fans have had on the game outside of it (see Moreno 2020 for an example of this). The unique phenomenon of *ACNH's* particular popularity during lockdown is also a burgeoning area of scholarship worthy of further exploration (examples include Zhu 2020; Lin & Su 2020; and Vuong et al. 2021). More broadly, there is scope to further investigate personas in gaming as specifically responsive to social and cultural impetuses like the pandemic: understanding how player-character identities emerge during moments of significant social and cultural upheaval, particularly from an autoethnographic perspective. Milik urges ongoing persona research as “an increasingly valuable tool [as] we become more invested in our online social networks and digital games” (2017, p. 76). As a means of stymying some of the loss inflicted by the pandemic, the personas emerging from playing *ACNH* provide methods of navigating the digital game and its resultant communities, whilst the game itself provides invaluable remedies for players deprived of connection, routine and stability.

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