

'Animal Crossing in the age of social distancing'

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Why Animal Crossing is such an important game in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak?

I always repeat to myself, almost like a mantra, that games don't happen in a vacuum. I find it extremely important to look at games in the cultural context where they happen because they tell so much about us as human and the times we're living in. This is incidentally true for every playful activity, if you are one of those dying to draw a border between the two (I'm not, I like my borders to be fuzzy to the point of non-existence).

So, it's really remarkable seeing a game like Animal Crossing out exactly in the moment in history where it makes the most sense: it's March 2020 and a huge part of the world is under lockdown and terrified for the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Of course I'm not saying that the Animal Crossing's dev team knew about the pandemic beforehand and strategically planned for having the game out exactly now (although it's a conspiracy theory way more fun and interesting than the ones I keep listening to) but for sure the very way the game is played reflects the current history of the world. Just the fact this game is having a huge success and popularity to the point [the Nintendo Switch is almost impossible to find](#) certainly says something.

Animal Crossing has a long history which dates back to the late days of the N64, although it started to become popular with the Nintendo GameCube. In the game you start your life in a village (now on an island) populated by weird antropomorphic characters. You can do all sort of things, like fishing, bug hunting, taking care of your house interior design. It's about living a life in this little space. And of course you interact with the characters, which show their own personalities and design choices. The in game time follows that of the real world, which somewhat forces you to get to the game in certain days or hours to take part in different special events. In all this you can connect to the Internet and visit other player's places, exchange goods and send letters.

The spacetime

Of course in this sort of game the way the space is designed and how we can interact with it is crucial. When you arrive there, the village/island is rather anonymous. Wild trees grow

everywhere, there are weeds, not much is going on. With your intervention this start changing, little by little. The game is very wise in giving you new possibilities and prefers to slow the process down as much as possible. Everything in Animal Crossing screams to take your time and go slowly. The interface is clunky and forces you to have a conversation with the other characters. Flowers and trees take time to grow. Fish and bugs show up only in certain months. This has a very important impact on the space. If at first you are a complete stranger, little by little you start leaving traces in the area. You plant flowers, you get new fruit plants from nearby cities, you design little tiles to place around. The little animals talk with you, they give you errands but they still see you as one of them. If you use the tool to personalise a dress, they notice it and start wearing it as well, in a sort of rudimental trend simulation. They talk about each other, sometimes they have an argument, they do exercises in the morning. They live their little lives no matter what.

Many games treat you just like a player. The NPC only exist to give you quests or to show you parts of the game lore, acknowledging you for the only function of being a player. In this sense, videogames often fail to be meaningful spaces and tend to feel more like what the french anthropologist Marc Augé defined as *non places*. According to him

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.

The island in Animal Crossing can be easily seen as a meaningful place. It becomes so more and more as you keep playing and discover new things and leave new traces. This has a very first impact in the time of lockdown. Now we are forced to stay home and our only relationship with the public space has become purely utilitaristic (getting food or maybe doing a bit of exercise in a park, keeping the distance from other people). The relational, historical, concerned with identity space of our lives has been almost entirely suspended (with the obvious exception of our home). Animal Crossing, moreso if played with other people, gives us back that kind of space. It's important to add that nothing in Animal Crossing threatens you in any way (not even the few dangerous insects which just have a comical effect on your in-game character). It's a completely safe space, where self expression and experimentation with identity is not only accepted, but encouraged through interior design, decoration and dressing.

Another fundamental point in strengthening the sense of place of the island is how the museum evolves while you donate bugs and fish you catch. The museum itself is designed in a way that connects with the lore and the history of the islands. The hall in the fossils section which connects the various type of villagers with their animal ancestors is a brilliant example of this perspective.

A space of play

I am a big fan of the way Gregory Bateson has described play while observing the animals in San Francisco zoo, in the 50s. Bateson view is that play implies metacommunication, in the sense that it must be clear to whoever takes part in a playful activity that the actions they take have a different meaning; a playful bite is represented as a bite but doesn't carry the same significance and context of a *real* one. In this sense I like to think of play as a sort of a temporary language in which grammar and meaning tend to be concentrated in the actions we do as players.

Animal Crossing is a game that leaves a lot of space for just being playful. Play lies in the way you can dress your character, in little actions you can do together with other people and in the design and in the way you arrange furniture around. That space of play can be used to communicate non-verbally with other people. Around a week after the game has come out, many players have started wearing doctor masks. This simple choice in identity representation has had the strong communicative value of stating a certain approach towards the pandemic crisis and also as [a way to raise awareness and start a conversation about the present and the future](#).

This last point is crucial. For many people during lockdown the actions you take in Animal Crossing are in many ways the one we're giving up right now in the hope of a better future. Running outside in a safe and idyllic place, enjoying mundane activities and connecting with friends immediately resonate against the shock of a lockdown. The playful space enable us to keep imagining a positive future. The role of play and imagination in building something new or in overcoming a crisis is born from the creative power of the game's language. What we can do in the game is exactly the grammar we need in order to imagine a future. In her book *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit observes exactly this:

“Despair demands less of us, it's more predictable, and in a sad way safer. Authentic hope requires clarity — seeing the troubles in this world — and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable and immutable.”

Solnit connects hope to imagination. And imagination is the realm of play. She also finds in joy an essential point of dealing with crisis and sudden change:

“Joy doesn't betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated and isolated, joy is a fine act of insurrection.”

The whole atmosphere of Animal Crossing builds up a terrain where we can cultivate hope through imagination and we can experiment subversion through play. In her seminal book *Critical Play — Radical Game Design*, Mary Flanagan has pointed out how the language of play can be used, and is often used, in order to criticise the current world, exorcise it and imagine a new one. One of the most poignant example of this process is how in the victorian age, little girls started to enact funerals for their dolls as a way to criticise and subvert the expected role in society that these dolls represented. A toy is a natural playful object that leaves open many possibilities. Often that is not the same for a game, and yet some dark and different things have started to happen in certain Animal Crossing islands.

People have decided to contrast the cheerful and light mood of the game and to [design creepy and unsettling scenes](#). This action has so many parallels with the ones described in Flanagan's book and they can be read as ways to openly talk about current feelings and emotions. Again, the open nature of the game enables and encourages that sort of creativity, and makes the conversation between players richer and more nuanced.

About gifts

In Animal Crossing gift is a very prominent element; so much if we consider that it's present since the first incarnation of the game, albeit the GameCube didn't have the possibility of directly

connect to the Internet. All the versions of the game share the same underlying mechanic: the economy is based on the fact that not all objects are equally available to you, so the only way to collect the things you want for decorating your house and island is to exchange gifts with the other players.

The concept of gift is of a great importance in human relationships. The kind of gift that is not seen as a social obligation still carries a power in connecting people and establishing relations. The French anthropologist Marcel Mauss has studied how the gift influences human interactions by looking at a particular ritual exchange (the *kula* ring) happening among the inhabitants of the Trobriand islands. These people use to run annual trips throughout the archipelago while bringing small gifts to the neighboring communities.

It's not by chance that the importance of the gift is revealed the most in situations where the connection between people is more difficult. The exchange, observes Mauss, carries with it a sort of spiritual power, *mana*, in the form of an unsaid obligation of returning, at some point, the gift. It's a very different thing from an economic transaction. It's almost as with the gift the travellers leave a part of themselves; a part that then is returned when someone from another island starts the same trip. This spiritual obligation is what ensure that periodic trips from one island to all the others keep to be taken, thus facilitating commerce and human connection.

In this case, we can see it through the weird combination of a game that is actually set on deserted islands and a time where people cannot freely move around because of the enforced lockdown. Here giving and receiving in-game gifts becomes a vital exchange of *mana*, the promise that this communication channel will be kept open.

Gifts in *Animal Crossing* are often also the expression of how we see another person, and they act as a sort of social mirror that in many ways takes the place of verbal communication.

There has been a lot of criticism around *Animal Crossing* coming from a very capitalist and colonialist point of view. While I understand and I agree with the points raised, I wanted to change the focus a little bit on how this game is used and why. And on how the playful activities inside the game have a certain meaning. Quite frankly, analysing a game like this (and any other game that leaves a space for free play) just from the point of view of its foundational mechanics leaves out a very important point, which is about how people play it, how they use that space and grammar and what conversations can arise from that. In other words how play in that environment can help us better understand how we are thinking and acting in the context of a crisis.

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