

Playing across the social zone

Animal Crossing, gaming communities and connectedness in a time of crisis.

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Abstract

This proposal focuses on the multifaceted interplay between video games, connectiveness, and online communities in a time of emergency; COVID-19 has presented challenges for teenagers, forcing them to re-mediate their interactions with peers. Digital entertainment has been frequently accused to be a bearer of negative attitudes and anti-social behaviors, but there is also relevant evidence about how video games can foster bonding and inclusion. Nevertheless, updated lenses are needed for understanding the impact of the pandemic on playing and vice versa; in other words, video games can become a lens through which we can understand how teenagers and young adults experience and see the world around them, especially during these turbulent times. Moreover, video games are increasingly experienced in multiple ways, from watching live shows on Twitch.tv to discussing games on Reddit; as such, this additional layer must be investigated too for situating the impact of gaming practices on social and individual schemes. This article intends to provide a snapshot of how this medium can be used as a catalyst for social research, looking at its consumption but also at the social halo it conveys. More specifically, an ethnographic approach has been chosen for providing an intensive analysis of how the acclaimed video game *Animal Crossing* was perceived and used as a socializing tool by a teenager.

Keywords: Animal Crossing; covid-19; ethnography; media platforms; teenager; video games.

Introduction

There is an increasing attention to how video games are shaping new generations and young adults, rising concerns about isolation and disruptive behaviors but also pointing to meaningful social interactions. The current pandemic has fostered this debate toward new directions due to the forced quarantine we are all experiencing. Video games are increasingly becoming social hubs, where players can discuss and communicate in novel ways while developing critical thinking attitudes and viewpoints.

This article aims to explore this potential by focusing on how a teenager is playing and using a social game - Animal Crossing - for building a virtual zone but also understanding current events, from Covid-19 emergency and disinformation to political and cultural debates. The approach chosen is an ethnographic one, and results point to uncover how video games can be deployed for social research but also education in a time of crisis.

Theoretical premises

There is a relevant literature about the role of digital entertainment in shaping social skills and connectiveness in both offline and online settings.

Video games have been analyzed as triggers for empowering family/peer relationships, empowering wellbeing and mutual understanding in domestic settings (e.g., Costa & Veloso, 2016; Coyne et al., 2011). At the same time, there are concerns about how this medium would foster isolation, aggressivity, and poor social skills (DeLisi et al., 2013; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014). Moving to online outlets surrounding the sector like Reddit.com and Twitch.tv, empirical evidence suggests multi-faceted outcomes, from hosting toxic attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Markey & Ferguson, 2017) to promoting informal learning and inclusion (e.g., De Grove, 2014; Eichberg, 2016). As pointed by the World Health Organization (Snider, 2020), the pandemic has empowered video games as key instruments for bonding and community building, addressing the lack of social interactions and human contact that COVID-19 entailed. As such, the role of this sector is currently under the spotlight from two main perspectives:

1. Its ability to re-mediate social interactions between teenagers and young adults.
2. The role of online communities around digital entertainment as additional social hubs.

Both these lenses need to be addressed for better understand how digital entertainment is a) compensating the forced lack of face-to-face interactions and b), through related social media, is working as a window into the outside world; the pandemic has seen the occurrence of a variety of global dynamics and issues, from misinformation to racism and political propaganda in several countries around the world. This article aims to address these two foci with an emphasis on teenagers and video games designed for replicating social interaction and their media platforms.

Methodology

The methodological perspective chosen is an ethnographic one driven by a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013), which claims that technology enables new discursive practices. A female preteenager (named Sofia) was followed for 6 months (April-September 2020) during her playing sessions, solo and shared with friends, with

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (AC). AC is a popular “island simulation” that promotes kindness and non-aggressive behaviors. In addition, her activity on Twitch.tv and Reddit channels about AC was recorded and discussed as well. The analytical lens was critical (being the researcher the father of the subject) (Crawford, 1996), looking at sensitizing concepts and drivers (Bowen, 2006) during the observation and collecting related think-aloud comments and materials (e.g., weekly diary, drawings, screenshots) created by Sofia. Monthly activities (e.g., game design exercises, semi-structured interviews) were planned as reflective milestones (Pink, 2009).

Two main drivers led this study. The first regarded the transformative potential of AC as a surrogate of face-to-face interactions with related strengths but also issues. As such, key constructs deployed were the adolescent wellbeing framework (Ross et al., 2020) and the intersection between simulations and simulacra (Baudrillard, 1983, 1994) for comprehending the impact of game mechanics on emotions and engagement. The second is the perception of online communities and their online debates as a dive into the public and its traits. From this perspective, media platforms like Twitch.tv can be bearers of critical thinking if properly supported, forcing teenagers to deal with the reality of social media. The game community of inquiry framework (Soyturk, Gandolfi & Ferdig, 2020) served as a main reference.

Results

Findings point to a role of AC as a surrogate of social interactions for the first two months, with a high consumption and no willing to be exposed to multiplayer. Sofia played the game enjoying its stress-free mechanics, implying that it worked as a sort of safe zone against the confusion brought by the pandemic.

“I like there is not fight, I like there is no pressure to do things”

“This is how every game should look like”

She enjoyed collecting materials and animals, interacting with the non-playing characters, and exploring the island and its features (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Sofia's avatar in front of her house in AC.

From the materials and discussions collected, the first phase was due to a sense of fear of a generic “other”, but also to the need of a comfort zone without interruptions.

“It is not like the real world, but even the real world is not the same anymore”

“I know I have to pay the rent, but there are no deadlines”.

AC was also considered different from the other games usually played, based on clear goals and competitions. For Sofia, it meant to “be lazy, and do not feel bad about it”. There was a sense of wonder supporting the idea of AC as a simulation – i.e., an imperfect replica of reality that hosts a certain degree of uncertainty and unknown (Baudrillard, 1994). In addition, AC was constantly updated with new elements, generating expectations and an ongoing curiosity (see figures 2 and 3). This perception was strengthened by some in-game elements related to the pandemic and a “in-progress” situation, like the virtual mask the digital character can wear.

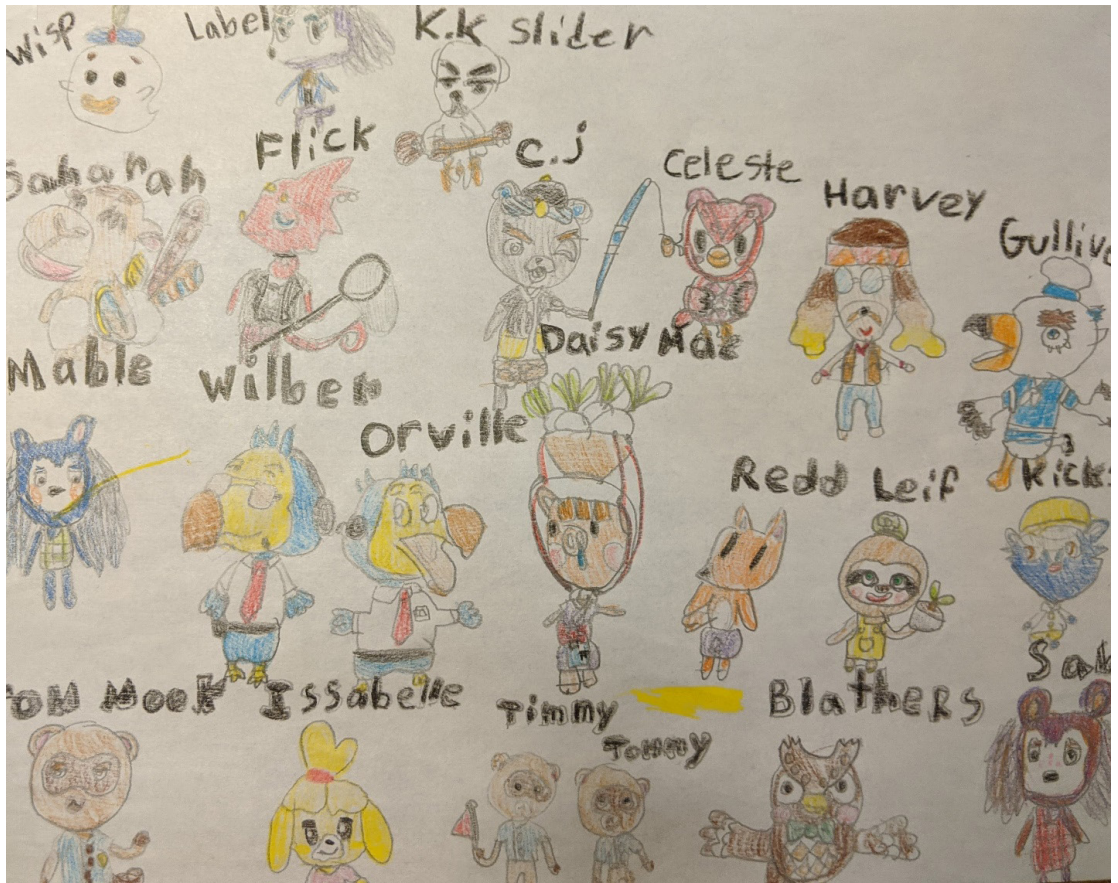


Figure 2. AC characters (drawing by Sofia)



Figure 3. Sofia's avatar fishing in AC (drawing by Sofia)

However, this effect started to fade away after covering all the main aspects of the game and being exposed to increasing requests for keeping the non-playing villagers happy. The game became then a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983) – i.e., a replication of the reality without any stimulus or surprise to discover. As such, the AC multiplayer worked as a necessary step forward to “escape” the comfort zone and be exposed to external elements able to give the game new life. Sofia started to visit other players’ islands and meet with her peers from real life (Figure 4). This switch allowed a reframing of the game, from a consolatory experience to a source of insights and growth.

“I visited this island today about Harry Potter. It is incredible how many efforts its creator spent”

“I am taking notes about this [island]. I want to replicate it!”

“Playing with Anna after all these weeks was just great.”

“I want others to visit my island; I want them to see me!”



Figure 4. Sofia with one of her friends from real life in AC.

Since the beginning of the study, Sofia explored online environments (Reddit.com, Discord, Twitch.tv) about AC, mainly looking for strategies and insights. At the beginning, there was an initial sense of wonder and uncritical acceptance of the content observed online about the game (e.g., strategies, tips).

“There are some many great things out there [Reddit]; look at this dress!”

“This guy posted a list of animals I can catch this month [on my AC island], this is super helpful”

Moreover, non-AC references (e.g., facts related to COVID-19, US political elections) were noticed but mainly ignored.

Then, she intervened on these platforms asking for help regarding how to find specific gadgets and animals. The positive reaction from the community was well perceived, and pushed her to be more critical and active in evaluating the AC-related content

This attitude changed mastering the game but also inquiring about the information not related to the game. Such an effort became a trigger for actively discussing these topics at home but also playing the game differently with friends. This attention entailed a “going back” to a now expanded comfort zone, with more shared sessions and a self-reported improvement in terms of wellbeing and social readiness.

“This discussion (Discord) is about the inutility of having a mask on AC because COVID does not exist...this is just not true” (see figure 5)

“I was talking with my friend [on AC] about how everybody should behave like in the game (...) you can change skin color, outfit, mood. And this is ok, everybody is friend with each other”

“I will move all these things (political debate about Black Lives Matter) on my island. Here everybody is polite and listens to each other”.



Figure 5. Sofia's avatar wearing the mask in AC.

This realization allowed her to appreciate the AC gameplay and its pacifist attitude, but also to explore how different people can have divergent interpretations of the same experience. This is aligned with the game community of inquiry framework (Soyturk, Gandolfi & Ferdig, 2020), which frames three dimensions in learning about gaming in online environments – i.e., appeal (finding new information and willing to inhabit these virtual outlets), receptiveness (feeling to be understood and supported), and cognitive insights (being stimulated but also embracing a critical attitude toward the virtual outlet itself). This epiphany was also able to address themes beyond the topic, as we have seen. AC became a lens for anchoring these reflections and facing opinions and viewpoints contrasting Sofia's ideas. Moreover, it worked as a concrete waking up call for questioning information found online.

“It is incredible to see how these people fight about facts, things we know”

“I hope nobody is believing this one [user]. His game tips are good, but the ideas about Covid are so wrong!”

She discussed these thoughts with her peers as well during shared game sessions, creating a virtuous loop of debate and “interplay”.

The game-design milestones, based on speculative design thinking, detected this progression as well. Sofia was asked to create hypothetical sequels or remakes of AC every month according to her opinions at the time. Her creations were at the beginning sequels with just more elements and activities to do; at the end, her imagined games were social hubs where different players could create together and discuss negative emotions and feelings for curing them.

“AC is great, but we need something more. For instance, a system awarding players giving something to other players”

“AC should be updated also according to what happens in the world, not just COVID. It has to be”.

To summarize, AC started as a stand-alone experience and then, because of its multiplayer and social components, became an opportunity to discuss important topics and develop a more mature take on digital consumption and exposure.

Implications

Playing AC both as a game and as an expanded version worked both as a tool and lens for understanding Sofia and her relationship with COVID. This highlight tells us the value of using video games as tools of discovery and social research.

The implications of this study are noteworthy for both scholars and practitioners. The former group can expand its highlights, exploring how teenagers use information found online for strengthening their bonding through gaming; in addition, these results highlight the increase synergy between games and media outlets, and how any type of intervention should take this factor into account. Despite the several risks related to toxicity and cyberbullying and the need of supervision, there is a remarkable potential for fostering critical thinking and discussion.

The latter group may reflect on how to harness these community hubs but also borrow the methods deployed in the study for shaping instructional and critical practices supporting connection and critical thinking in teenagers – looking at models like the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework. Young generations are increasingly involved with online gaming and related social media. As such, we need to develop strategies and solutions for educating them in navigating such a complex scenario.

This study presents three limitations worth to consider.

First, its ethnographic approach implies a relevant subjectivity of the results; as such, additional studies (with different targets, methodologies, and so on) need to be directed for expanding and generalizing its scope and collecting more evidence regarding video games for social interaction in a time of crisis.

Second, it focuses on one specific video game; despite the popularity and pertinence of AC, alternative titles could have been selected.

Third, these findings need to be re-tested after the pandemic for understanding how COVID-19 played a role in informing them.

Despite these weaknesses, this proposal is relevant because uncovers how social video games can work as instruments for teenagers bonding along with related online environments. It is also aligned with the increasing need to uncover the transformative potential of digital entertainment with interdisciplinary implications, from sociology to education.

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