

**Welcome to My Town:
performance and creativity among Animal Crossing bloggers on
Tumblr**

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This essay is dedicated to those bloggers who gave me their time, energy, and love.

May your projects thrive. (^_^)

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Abstract

Through participant observation as a fan blogger and through a series of online interviews, the lives of *Animal Crossing* fan bloggers are revealed as amalgams of multiple, mutually informative identities, drawn together through images and sensory experiences both on and off the screen. Inspired by Boellstorff's application of *techne* to explain virtual communities, this essay explains how game skills such as pattern design and plot resetting are accompanied by blogger skills such as art-making, humor, post design, relevant hashtagging, and photo editing; these talents work together to simultaneously create unity in the aesthetics of the community and division among bloggers. Operating through trading, art, screenshots, photographs, videos, sound, and verbal discourse, English speaking *Animal Crossing* blogs are performances of self and community, exhibitions of a rhizomatic fandom embedded in soils of ideology and technology, materiality and success.

Introduction

I sort of stumbled onto all these stunning AC blogs, and instantly wanted to be a part of the community. You can tell how much love and care goes into everyone's towns, and seeing them all led me to discover all of the creative possibilities I didn't even know existed in this game! I was truly inspired, and I find myself still being inspired daily. It's almost insatiable, really! I understand why so many bloggers have multiple towns. I constantly have ideas for new towns running through my head, waiting to be fulfilled.

—Gina, an *Animal Crossing* blogger

A warm inviting song leaks outward from tiny speakers snuggled next to the screen in front of your face. The camera pans across a town landscape showing roads paved with grey stone, snow-covered trees bearing fruit, benches, fountains, and houses. This is your town, you are assured by the rows of lychee trees planted to harvest for income, by the black flowers dotting the landscape meticulously cross-bred from parents which you watered every day. This is what you might see when booting up *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (ACNL), a life-simulator video game developed by Nintendo for their 3DS handheld console. Players of ACNL act as the mayor of a town which they get to name, inhabit, and ultimately develop as they amass in-game capital and unlock features by playing.



Fig 1. The startup screen is seen every time the game is booted



Many ACNL players use the internet to share information, and show off their creations. But Tumblr is not just a box that players put pictures of their town, their designs, and guides in. Just like the game, it is a site of play, creation, and

negotiation between bloggers and followers, fan artists and appreciators. Many blogs are diary-like public performances which track the progress and daily happenings within the blogger's virtual town, which, despite a shared origination from the same game software, is objectively and socially different from anyone else's town. Blogs also act as billboards which announce trades give-aways, where players share for free or exchange in-game items. Fan artists use blogs in a similar way, by arranging paid commissions, displaying their own and other's art, and often journaling about the artistic process and their daily lives.

Bloggers maintain multiplex identities as artists, players, watchers, medical patients, romantic partners, and mayors in the virtual towns of *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. These identities are honed, indexed, and performed on blog pages, singular

entities which again become multiple when showcased next to other blogs on followers' timelines. *Animal Crossing* Tumblr, an admittedly arbitrary collective of bloggers who don't always talk about *Animal Crossing*, is, to borrow from Anna Tsing, a pericapitalist space (Tsing 2015). It is beside capitalism, but not entirely defined by or derivative of it. This is a place where neoliberal notions of self may explain the styles and methods of networking, blog performance, and valuation, but cannot fully capture the histories and aspirations of bloggers. AC Blogs often act as proxies, journaling the progress of towns which exist on the *Nintendo 3DS* handheld, bringing those towns to life on internet browsers and the Tumblr mobile app. Drawing off Boellstorff's application of *techne* to explain virtual communities (Boellstorff 2008), game skills such as pattern design and plot resetting are accompanied by blogger skills such as art-making, humor, post design, relevant hashtagging, and photo editing in order to simultaneously create unity in the aesthetics of the community and division among bloggers. Operating through trading, art, screenshots, photographs, videos, sound, and verbal discourse, English speaking *Animal Crossing* blogs are performances of self and community, exhibitions of a rhizomatic fandom embedded in soils of ideology and technology, materiality and success.

Chapter 1: Method

Research Question

Why is it that bloggers, in the absence of face-to-face interaction, touch, smell, taste, are return again and again to play, trade, share, and perform around *Animal Crossing*? How is it that a group of people, united at minimum by only a shared language and appreciation for Nintendo's game, most often with limited or no information about the human on the other side of the screen, form bonds, emotional attachments, jealousy, even intimacy? How is community on the internet even possible? How is community centered around a shared hobby realized, when its members can't even sit down next to each other and see the smile on her faces as they play?

Goals

My research involves participant observation among English-speaking fans of the *Animal Crossing* (AC) video game series on Tumblr, a prominent microblogging and "social networking" website. Because of the WiFi receiver on Nintendo's 3DS line of handheld consoles (essentially a modern day Gameboy), *Animal Crossing* provides limited ability to connect to other players and interact online, despite being a single player game the rest of the time. While playing the latest iteration, *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (ACNL), players create and manage their towns by socializing with villagers, planting flowers and trees, commissioning public works projects (PWPs) as well as

pursuing hobbies like fishing and bug catching. Players are also given an in-game drawing tool, allowing them to create unique designs which can be shared online as quick response (QR) codes. AC focused bloggers form communities which reveal that engagement with video game software does not end when the game is turned off- it leaks into real life and actually constitutes the creative and social lives of many fans. My research asks what are the noticeable trends in the ways that fans create their own identity and interact with Animal Crossing in discursive and cooperative ways, and where do disagreements or contradictions arise in these communities? I am also interested in furthering a theory of internet communication and social media studies which does not conflate all social media or “digital” communities as taking place in the same ways, and I ask how does the user interface (UI) of Tumblr, including spatial layout and website functions (reblogging, comments, etc.), afford or limit the user to particular outcomes, and can these outcomes be challenged?

Many bloggers premeditate and plan their blogging behaviors while playing the game. This is evidenced by screenshots which are taken while playing, and then selectively shared online with other players.



Fig 2. A screenshot of my avatar (pictured right) meeting with Susan using Animal Crossing wifi feature. I fished by the dock at around 8 or 9 in the evening, while Susan and I talked. The game clock corresponds with a real 24-hour cycle, whether or not the game is turned on.

How are these images made into circulating, discursive objects by fans? As an attempt to engage with ethnographic methods, I plan to collect information and personally engage with many different aspects of this culture- language used in humorous, emotional, or practical ways; fan art and creative expression; “place” and Tumblr as a medium or virtual locale; identity, and the importance of the blog, the blogger, and the in-game avatar.

By engaging with fans as an equal, by creating and maintaining my own blog, contacting individual bloggers and cataloging blog posts, I plan to get an overall sense of what behaviors fans take part in, how do they behave together, and how do materials or digital images augment or even constitute forms of verbal and visual discourse. I have created an Animal Crossing (AC) related blog page (culture-crossing.tumblr.com) on which I have advertised my presence as an anthropologist, described my current research project, and have reached out to other AC bloggers in order to find willing interlocutors. To date, I have found my interlocutors through a non-random snowballing sampling method, which I achieved by posting advertisements to my blog describing my search for people wanting to talk about their experiences playing and blogging about Animal Crossing. I also have cataloged Tumblr posts for later analysis, talked with bloggers over Tumblr’s built-in instant messaging (IM) feature, and through that IM conducted, and plan semi-structured interviews.

In these interviews, I held on to a few key beliefs. Firstly, that while having a list of interview questions is helpful, especially at first when I am unfamiliar with the conversation partner, improvising questions which are more closely tailored to the individual is a crucial part of obtaining meaningful information. For instance, if someone revealed that they are very preoccupied with the cliques and so-called “popular” blogs on Tumblr, I will ask them questions related to that topic. In essence, each answer I get is an opportunity for a new series of questions for the individual. Secondly, I am keen on asking each interlocutor about their opinion on my research, and what they would desire to see in an article about the Animal Crossing Tumblr community (if they would even wish to see such a thing at all). By doing so, I hope to engage the community and create not just a work about them, but with them. One interviewee, Evan, was especially thoughtful in communicating what he would like to see in a paper written about his community-

That's a good question. I never really thought about it before. Perhaps talk about how sharing is such an important part of the community: trading items/villagers, selling them for bells, giving away items/bells/villagers for "adoption", that sort of thing. Plus the immense amount of fanart, qr codes, and fanmade merchandise (stickers, charms, prints, etc.) made by those who love the games.

My research incorporated existing literature from anthropology and related fields in order to ground my ethnography in pre-existing theories and methodologies, as well as to challenge or corroborate them. I began work on this project in April of 2016, and

continued gathering the core pieces of my data for cca. 8 months until January 2017. During these eight months, I not only gathered the my ethnographic data, but also indexed and organized it, compiled my personal notes, and completed reading the core of my relevant literary research. Between January and April 2017 I organized evidence and wrote this essay. The end goal of this project was to write a partial but detailed ethnography of the English-speaking *Animal Crossing* fan community on Tumblr.

Interview Protocol

Personal questions like “what’s your name?” and “where are you from?” were not asked, and although this could be construed as a weakness of method, it

- 1) Allowed me to avoid discomfort, prying, or my coming across as “creepy.” After all, I could offer no evidence for how their information would be used
- 2) Allowed me to focus on *Animal Crossing* and blogger’s relationships to it.

Blog names were omitted in favor of simple pseudonyms, to help the reader keep track of individuals while also protecting the identity of participating bloggers. The gender of the pseudonyms does not necessarily correspond to the blogger’s gender, which in many cases is unknown.

Quotes from bloggers are unchanged, and retain all original typos, punctuation, and spellings, except where I changed words for clarity- a practice I use minimally and denote here with square brackets.

On my blog, at the top of the web page, I briefly described my identity as a researcher interested in AC bloggers. Operating off the assumption that not everyone

would read this, I held myself to the standard of briefly explaining my project to each interviewee, and asking if they would be willing to participate.

The first interview I conducted was with Evan, and with him we set a date and time and chatted in a more-or-less “live” or contemporary exchange. My second interviewee, Portia, surprised me when she took a while to answer, and didn’t seem to care too much about setting a time and date even though I suggested it. From then on, I was more conscious and asked my respondents which interview style they would prefer—a scheduled time block, or a more sporadic correspondence over time.¹ This helped me realize that doing an interview online is not exactly like doing one in real life. This alternate, desynchronized interview method, allows both the interviewer and interviewee to send messages back and forth at leisure, sometime with a period of days or even weeks gone by in between messages. This opened the door for me to contact people ‘at any time,’ but this prospect was as daunting and overwhelming as it was convenient. The instant accessibility left me wondering at which times should I be checking in on Tumblr and ‘living in my fieldsite’ and which times should I not. The intangibility and concentration of Tumblr to small screens surrounded by otherness, be they iPhone or computer, struck me as I was checking in on Tumblr while standing in line at a cafe to buy a bagel. This moment ties in with James Clifford’s observation that “the focused ethnographic moment always leaks beyond its frame into other “irrelevant” events” (Clifford 1990). My “fieldsite” was not something I went out in lived in, but rather something I had to actively seek out by adding it into my daily routine.

¹My personal experience paralleled that of conducting this research in that sporadic messages over longer periods of time indicate intimacy in online settings, whereas brief interactions index a greater social distance. This principle is likely not limited to computer-mediated communities.

² I do not mean to imply that no players decide to forgo online resources and databases for one reason or another, even when such knowledge was easily accessible. Between gameplay on one hand and research done to enhance that play on the other, there is much to be said for the judgment of authenticity around experience, fun, and techniques of leisure management. For many reasons, not least of which is the

Retroactively, I can relate my research experience and ponder along with Clifford's question, "with increased coming and going, better global transport and mobility, where does the field begin and end?" Because my focus on research was not exactly a place, arguably not a "fieldsite" at all but a composite multi-authored text, I was more concerned with speeds and technologies of transportation of symbols (or, perhaps, data), not the transportation of living bodies.

However, I argue that calling Tumblr a *place* and calling my work *fieldwork* is not problematic as a result of being metaphorical. The line between texts and places is one that is not clear and thick. I will refer to Tumblr as a place, and, although I do not deny this motive, not just to legitimize my research as true fieldwork. The idea that texts are places, or places are texts, is reflected in many human endeavors, including Tibetan book covers which evoke architectural forms (Chanchani forthcoming), as well as in landscape painting. Landscape paintings along with most video games entextualize places in pictorial and verbal ways, bringing them into symbolic form using shape and color, movement and sound.

Game and Website

The interesting thing about studying "fans" is that you can also turn a critical eye to the thing(s) they are fans of. In the past year, I have gathered a large number of screenshots and texts from the game *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, and will incorporate some of this material throughout the ethnography to give a sense of the game's aesthetic and modes of play. I do this in order to emphasize that scenes within the game, although they may be viewed as static, actually become cultural objects, shared, lauded,

and manipulated. These images leave the space in which they were originally found- the screen of a 3DS- gaining new homes on social media, and are reproduced onto fan materials such as clothing, prints, and toys. Animal Crossing bloggers are in the business of collecting images and texts from the game, and (selectively) sharing them on Tumblr. By performing the duty of ethnographer by gathering source materials, I was doubling up as a participant in the fan culture, by engaging in the comparable practice of capturing and collecting.

The Ever Changing Project

This project was originally going to be about non-player characters (NPCs) in video games- the depictions of humans or anthropomorphized figures, not directly controlled by other people but rather written, designed, and coded into the game by its developers. Players get to “talk” and interact with NPCs and these interactions are especially significant in certain genres of game, like role playing games, or life simulators like *Animal Crossing* or *The Sims*. In fact, this wasn’t even going to be an academic research project at all. This all started when I was playing *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, and I had run out of room to store letters that villagers (the NPCs) kept sending me. The game lets you put 180 letters into storage at the post office, and keep 10 letters on hand in your bag, and I ran out of room. In addition, your mailbox can only store 10 letters at a time. In order to make room for the new ones, while still preserving the contents of the old, I decided to start transcribing the old letters into my computer, allowing me to delete the texts in-game while still preserving their content. But after a while, I started to realize just how odd and *unsatisfying* it was to see my letters in their

new place and format, inside a plain white digital document. Perhaps they just didn't mean the same thing outside of their context- the box shape, the unique stationeries, the font, the different color texts on the body vs. the "to" and "from" lines.



Fig 3. Letters often arrive with presents attached, in this case an NPC included her picture.

I had here realized the importance of the physical qualities of text artifacts, a realization which complicated my previously held notions of language as abstract and mental, and of things as material and corporeal. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban draw a distinction between "texts" and "text artifacts," a distinction which strikes me as parallel to that between phonemic and phonetic, between perceived, culturally specific notions and objective reality, "objective" only in that humans or machines can capture and reproduce its physical properties (Silverstein and Urban 1996). But the boundary between the subjective and objective capacities of language is transgressed when one considers the virtual, representative nature of all words. Words, just like pixelated images, are virtual— they proxies for other things. Virtue, deriving from the Latin *virtus*, (lit. "manliness") is the innate, invisible, but defining quality that unites persons and

ideas through cognition into categories. Online communications are bound and made complicated by the indexical relationships of virtuality.

Chapter 2: Materiality

When Tom Boelstorff introduces his ethnography on the players of *Second Life*, he doesn't describe a computer screen or a person sitting in a chair. Rather he describes a scene in the second person, "surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village while the launch or dinghy...sails away out of sight" (Boellstorff 2008: 3). Nothing about playing a video game per se. When detailing *Second Life's* opening sequence, he does not mention the word "virtual," or hint at all at the "fakeness" of the world. I read this as an attempt to emphasize the importance of these "objects," more specifically images made to represent objects in the outside world: wood, water, the trees. I would like to take the same approach by arguing that images are in themselves objects, and can circulate, symbolize, and be seen as objects would. I see no need to apply any different framework of thought to the images which constitute so much of *Animal Crossing* Tumblr.

For a player of ACNL, the console and game cartridge constitute the start of material culture. These objects layer into the game itself- seen through the screen- with its representations of objects, "people" and so forth. Outside of the screen, fans collect tangible items like amiibo cards and figurines, buttons, shirts, jewelry, and stuffed toys, some mass produced, some handcrafted by fan artists. While not necessary to play the game, players use these items to solidify, express, and perform identity (even if the only audience is the self). Because many of these materials are fan made, not mass produced, the possibility of these media to express solidarity with the central game object is simultaneously limited and enabled by the desire and resources of fan artists.



Fig 4. Taken from a fan's Tumblr post. Shown are games, books, toys, tradable cards, and posters.

Players interact with objects, including images (virtual objects), through many means, but in this analysis I will focus on only three of these: collecting, creating, and trading. All three of these behaviors involve social interaction as well as material interaction, but these realms are co-constitutive and mutually informative. Collecting and creating, however, do not seem as social as trading, for which exchange between multiple people is a requirement. I will briefly attempt here to unpack this assumption and show it to be false.

For many collectors, the act of display is a crucial sort of performance made through preparation and organization of materials. Collectors of all kinds find ways to display in private homes and museums, using shelves, glass cases, and binders, among

other means. The internet, here specifically the Tumblr website, gives another “place” to display such collections, but this place is one that travels immensely, and can exist in multiple places in multiple times, coexisting with the computers or devices of many observers. From this behavior, it is clear that collections such as these are not made entirely for the self, but for others, and for the self’s relationships to others.

However, not all players of Animal Crossing collect cards, figurines, or other such extraneous items. A different but overlapping group of fans engages in the collecting of virtual items while playing. The in-game store catalog, which grows as the player obtains progressively more items coupled with the large number of items (over a few thousand), encourages collecting as a play behavior.



Fig 5. Books like the Prima’s Official Strategy Guide (which has editions made for many video games) contain lists for keeping track of collection progress within game. Shown here are skirts.

Animal Crossing gives the player an open world of free choices, but the activity of collecting is specifically rewarded in game through certain features. Collecting is also enabled, reinforced, and encouraged by printed game guides including one such guide printed by Prima Games, a division of the publisher Random House. The Prima Guide

(fig. 5) provides “important” information about in-game items including 1) where to get it, 2) its sale value, and 3) its theme for the Happy Home Academy. The Happy Home Academy (HHA) is a fictional institution within ACNL that appraises the players home every night, giving scores based on their home’s interior design. Players gain points by including furnishings, flooring, and wallpaper of matching sets, colors and themes. Each item in game belongs to a certain one of eight HHA themes, like *antique*, *trendy*, *rustic*, and *sci-fi*. The players who know about and engage in the HHA ratings use specific online databases or wikis to identify the theme of their items². In addition to the HHA, players also research details such as when certain fish are able to be caught, or how to answer the barber, Harriet, in her sequence of questions to receive a desired haircut. The use of online databases, while not explicitly social, evidences connection between those who share knowledge and those who seek it— a relationship analogous to that between the humans that develop games and those who explore them.

In addition to the HHA, another mechanism of appraisal within ACNL is Gracie, a stylish, yet haughty giraffe who runs the exclusive in-game boutique “GracieGrace.” Clothing items, because they can be used as furniture, have an HHA theme, but they also have a style which is important for passing Gracie’s tests (during which she assesses the player’s outfit). Passing these weekly tests eventually gives access to the store GracieGrace, which sells items found nowhere else. Through this gameplay feature, collecting is rewarded with the ability to collect more (drastically more expensive) items from a boutique whose aesthetics evoke wealth and high status. The red carpets, ornate

² I do not mean to imply that no players decide to forgo online resources and databases for one reason or another, even when such knowledge was easily accessible. Between gameplay on one hand and research done to enhance that play on the other, there is much to be said for the judgment of authenticity around experience, fun, and techniques of leisure management. For many reasons, not least of which is the conscious attempt to preserve, individualize, or purify one’s leisure experience, many moviegoers avoid reading reviews before watching, and some readers avoid prefaces until the novel is read.

designs, black and white dresses, and animal prints all index Western high fashion, arguably as a caricature or parody. Gracie's ridiculous and snobbish dialogue lines show the sort of self-aware or parodical nature of these indices to the "real world" elite fashion.

On top of actually playing the game, fans look to external materials to inform their behaviors and expand their mastery of the game world. *Prima's Official Strategy Guide* (fig 5), displays the framework of purpose behind collecting behaviors, constituted by online trading as well as solo play. Items aren't just collected for the sake of collecting. They each contain the potential to 1) earn high ratings from the HHA, and thus unlock the golden house appearance, 2) earn access to Gracie's shop, 3) fill the catalog, 4) obtain assets to trade with other players online, 5) fill the museum, 6) sell for bells (in-game currency), and 7) give to villagers to gain verbal and material rewards, while also raising friendship levels to gain villager pics and "unlock" different dialogue pools. Furthermore, players may give objects to villagers with none of these extrinsic goals in mind. They may just be doing it for fun. In the same way that players don't always give items to villagers for these specific reasons, bloggers do not necessarily trade and give-away items to others for reciprocal rewards or praise. It could also be done for "altruistic", moral, or emotional purposes that aren't clearly represented by these practical rewards. I do not think these aspects are mutually exclusive, and I argue it is likely that both kinds of motivation are at work in instances of giving. We have come full circle to see again how virtual items constitute *actual* material, in that they circulate, carry emotional valence, are given, traded, manipulated, and shared. Objects, in this sense, are less defined by their physical dimensions and more by their roles in social interaction and human cognition

Chapter 3: Beginnings and Associations

One question I asked of multiple interviewees was “how did you first get involved with the Animal Crossing series?” I asked in order to discover context to place Animal Crossing as both a commodity and a ritual of play within a greater life story. How did players acquire this commodity? Who else was playing it with them and around them? While it is not the goal of my project to tell life stories of these gamers, I hope that this information will help me answer questions of what it means to be a fan, and begin to understand the diverse array of meanings and associations that Animal Crossing can have for different people in different contexts. No one is born a fan, but familial and peer influences, as well as media ideologies perpetuated by broader society, can play a large role in perpetuating or limiting fandoms.

Why Animal Crossing?

Of my interviewees, many played *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012) as a continuation of prior engagement with previous AC games, like *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (2005), which I interpret as an attachment to the specific franchise. Another player, Susan, had described to me preference for AC’s game genre, which she defined as being “slice of life,” giving *Harvest Moon* as another such game within this category. In this case, Susan’s connection stems from already being a gamer, and having an appreciation for a similar series. She told me, “I think I would enjoy playing the other versions [of AC] but there’s so many games I still haven’t played and want to, you

know?” Her being dedicated enough to have an AC blog doesn’t define her as a purist, nor does it indicate a desire to have consummate knowledge and experience of all the games in the entire *AC* series. By claiming to want to explore other games and possibly game-genres, Susan defines the complexity of her identity which would not be immediately apparent upon viewing her blog.

Others were introduced to the game by family members, and were reliant on adults in order to purchase the game, like Jesse who “played [*Animal Crossing: Wild World*] a couple times on [her cousin’s] DS before asking for a copy of it.” The 3DS device itself could enable or obstruct playing *Animal Crossing*, as it did for Jesse: “I think i had a ds by then, but if i didn’t i think wild world was the reason i got a ds”. As a game console, the 3DS is one of many mechanisms used socially to categorize gamers. Folk categories divide gamers by skill level, like “hardcore gamer,” or by loyalty to a certain hardware type, like “PC gamer” The different types of games and gamers come to be associated with stereotypes. As both a Nintendo system and a handheld, the 3DS could be seen as more oriented towards children, women, or casual gamers. From personal experience, the 3DS is often a peripheral or secondary console for very dedicated gamers, who usually play other games on PC or larger consoles in addition to owning a 3DS.

Surprisingly, one blogger’s introduction to *Animal Crossing* came through therapy. Nico told me,

Well I started when I was 9, & I had a pretty traumatizing childhood so I went through a lot of therapy & the therapist I saw had my start playing it. Every session I would sit there & play the game with them, & eventually for Christmas my parents bought me a Nintendo DS Lite with Wild World! [sic]

This was the most unexpected answer I received. After talking with clinical psychologist Dr. Mark Sullivan, I learned that it is not uncommon for therapists to play games with child clients. The reason for this, he claimed, is that it can lead to conversation and positive social interaction— which is the true goal behind this method, not the game playing itself. This explanation left more questions for me. Animal Crossing is a game full of simulated social interaction. Could this be a positive element for therapeutic treatment? Did Nico and her therapist talk about the game while she was playing it, or afterwards? Did they talk together about making decisions during the game, ‘should we go fishing or should we pick some fruit?’ Perhaps a methodological mistake, I did not pursue the topic of therapy with Nico, despite an immediate curiosity at having received such a surprising answer. I was just beginning to build an online rapport, and did not want to lose trust. However, I did ask her if she still feels like Animal Crossing is a therapeutic activity for her. She confirmed that it was, writing “the game itself is very comforting to me 11 years later. The music is probably the most therapeutic part.” The initial reason for playing, perhaps, achieving “comfort” in a recreational setting, remains intact over a decade after the first time playing.

Whether or not it is prescribed by a therapist, Animal Crossing is a crucial component of players’ emotional lives. Evan claimed that he began to play AC because he “needed a game [he] could escape and relax in.”

A little over a year ago. I had a lot of stress in May 2015, and I couldn't focus on my other games [...] I remembered a friend gave me Wild World a few years before that, so I popped it in and started my game. Then I got New Leaf

and Happy Home Designer in October and have been playing my ACNL town ever since.

Evan was presenting to me a situation where animal crossing could be played, but not other games. As a result of his stress, he “couldn’t focus on [his] other games (especially Monster Hunter 4, which [he] was playing a LOT at the time)”. I interpret his saying “a LOT” in capital letters to emphasize his Monster Hunter playing was in a way related to his stress at either as a way to cope with it. At that time, Evan made a choice to play *Animal Crossing*, but for emotional reasons ceased playing *Monster Hunter*. This brief story brings to the fore the importance of studying specific games, not just video games as a category. Players don’t see all games or game genres as the same, so why should the researchers that study them?

Becoming a Gamer

A millennial who was 25 years old in 2016 would have been ten when the first Animal Crossing game was released for the Gamecube in 2001. Many who have strong attachments to it grew up with AC, as it was a large component of their childhood play and fantasy- sometimes a lonely ritual, sometimes one bringing together siblings and family. One millennial, Gina, hints at this common, yet not universal, narrative when she brings up that she “never played video games growing up,” and “didn’t even own a console!”. The emphatic adverb “even” and the exclamation mark of this last remark might serve to emphasize the the contrast between her childhood experience and a perceived “standard” experience for North American children around and after the

1980's. It also might serve to emphasize another difference, that between past Gina from and her current self, a dedicated *AC* fan blogger.

When she claims that “even the thought of playing a video game gave [her] anxiety,” I am led to ask why? The earliest video games emphasized hand-eye coordination, quantitative representations of success, and simulative violence, emulating historically male sports. Mastering this style of game relies on the need for constant practice and validation of the winning score. The first computer program-- which could be considered a videogame-- was in fact a military training device meant to simulate firing missiles onto a target (Boellstorff). The perception of videogames as axes of masculine competition, especially among boys and young men (young Gina's peers) was likely to affect Gina, but I do not deny that other unknown factors likely contributed. My larger point, however, is that videogames contain the potential for forging connections, not just among families, friends, and romantic partners, but to concepts and imagined divisions within society. For Gina (and others), videogames as a larger genre become an agent, or a concept, which one has a relationship with. The medium as a whole becomes the topic of scrutiny and faith, subconsciously or otherwise. Ilana Gershon refers to *media ideologies*, analogous to language ideologies, to capture this notion of indexicality between particular media and their culturally appropriate uses and users. In Gina's case, media ideology is shown to be a changing and fluid dynamic. *Animal Crossing* exists both as an object and metaphor, intertwined with her childhood memories, her expectations of what a child should be, and the people involved.

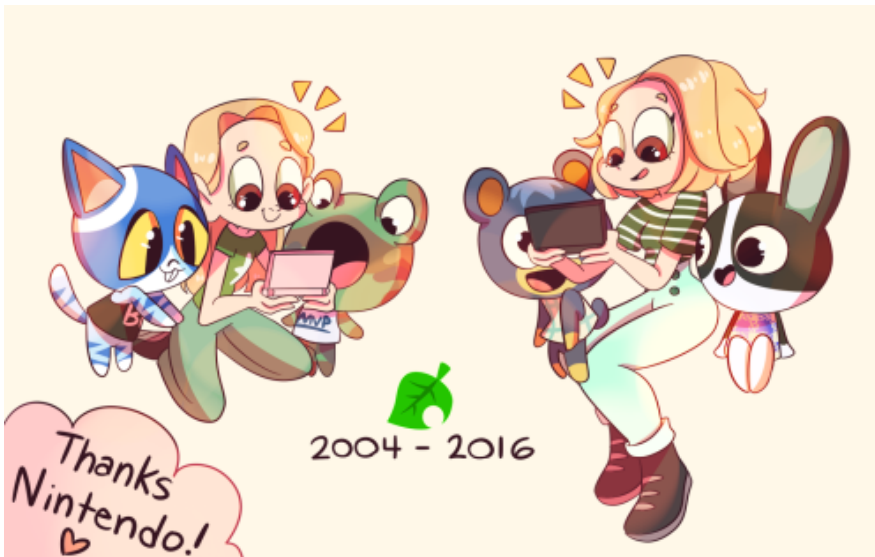


Fig 6. (artist: Bee) Autobiographical representation of her relationship to AC through time.

Gina's boyfriend gave AC to her as a "starter game"-- which I interpret to mean a non-competitive, non-violent, game with simple controls (and being a single player game, lacking the ever-looming threat of toxic online interaction). Just as important, AC was seen as a starter game *for* Gina, in a gender-specific context that heavily implies Animal Crossing is more like playing dolls than shooting targets. The inherently gendered nature of objects can have profound impacts on their users and conscious non-users. Alaina Lemon observes-- through studying drama students assigned to act like inanimate objects-- that the students did not focus on the specific brands of objects, nor their socialist vs. capitalist origins, but rather "the students stressed other social differences, overwhelmingly "male" vs. "female"." (Lemon 210). Gender is certainly a crucial contributor to the formation of language ideologies, and the perceptions of who should use certain media and for what.

Gina remarked to me that once she opened up to videogames as a medium, she ended up playing others and that once she was “more comfortable with game mechanics and controls, it opened [her] up to other possibilities.” This seems to describe the process of becoming a gamer. Just as Tom Boellstorff emphasized the importance of techne, or skill, in the identities and play rituals of Second Life players, here Gina is remarking on “game mechanics and controls” across many games as a skill set that she could be “comfortable with,” as opposed to a knowledge that she could recite. Is this a hint at what she meant by video games giving her anxiety? If it was truly “even the thought” of a game that evoked negative feelings, is there anything more at work here than merely being practiced in a physical skill set versus not? Her use of the word “mechanics,” shows her familiarity and adoption of gamer language. Here, identity is tied in not only through the object of Animal Crossing itself, but the conceptual yet neurologically realized set of motor skills and psychological comfort of being able to play video games. In her own words, AC “piqued” Gina’s “curiosity about other games, and how those games might also be entertaining and not so intimidating.”

From the online Interview with Gina:

I find, however, that ACNL and HHD [Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer] are the two games I play the most religiously. With other games, I usually go through a period of obsession, then the interest sort of peters out (Harvest Moon), or I become frustrated with the difficulty and put it down - never to be played again out of stubbornness (Ocarina Of Time, haha).

New Leaf is a game I'm never tired of playing.

Against a narrative of other games, AC games are different for her. Is this the result of it being her “first game”? Or perhaps because of the memories of her boyfriend, and of overcoming an anxiety about videogames, which she now enjoys? Is this differentiation, this human tendency towards specific attachments the essence of fandom? Amidst a slew of other games, other ways to have fun and be entertained, something is different, is better, is something you “never get tired of.” What makes certain objects, certain rituals more meaningful and others less so?

Multiple Identities

Similar to the Langkawi Malay of whom Janet Carsten writes, AC bloggers like Gina have identities tied together through people, material, and emotion, just as the Langkawi “notions of *semangat* [soul/essence] make clear an association between the life-stuff of persons, houses, and siblings” (Carsten 1995: 227). As Carsten’s “persons and their bodies have a multiple identity,” (ibid.) so too do those bloggers fulfill multiple roles which define and perpetuate each other. These identities are exemplified but not limited to *the player* who remains semi-anonymous, *the blogger* who constantly performs through text and imagery, and *the artist*, who creates, reappropriates, and shares. Through a relationship to all these other identities, the virtual identity of *mayor*, the game avatar, is made real. The *mayor*, as well as the town she inhabits and “runs”, is reproduced and represented by the artist, publicly showcased by the blogger, and ultimately given meaning by the player.

Becoming a blogger

I also asked interviewees about how they started their *AC* blogs. One informant told me “on an old blog of mine I saw a acnl post and decided to check out their blog, and then saw there was a whole new tumblr community for acnl fans/ animal crossing fans, and then I thought I’d make a new leaf blog and join the community!” So we can see here that blogging more generally is a ritual that precedes blogging about something specific, like *AC*. After an original discovery, she was inspired to “make a new leaf blog and join the community.” Making a new blog could involve transforming an old one, or the creation of a brand new URL. Tumblr allows you to have multiple blogs under one account, encouraging specialization and separation of blog “types”. For example, someone with an *AC* page might also have a separate one where they focus exclusively on classical archeology. Visitors to one blog will not be able see the other blogs that exist under the same user account, unless the user actively decides to advertise their alternate URL(s). This is common practice, as gaining popularity and viewership under one pseudonym could lead to viewership elsewhere. In addition, the inclusion of ‘advertising’ your other blog names may be done in order to provide a fuller, more diverse picture of the performing self, or to fulfill a perceived need of the viewers to observe a blogger in more than one way. Animal Crossing blogs, with many exceptions, tend to contain less personal entries about job, school, politics, and relationships. Providing easy links to alternate blogs which appear on a blog’s front page, readily accessible to visitors, changes the social dynamic of an Animal Crossing blog.

Another popular discussion site, Reddit, functions similarly to Tumblr by allowing for the separation of multiple spheres of interest. But it achieves this in an even

more discretizing manner by separating forums into discrete topics. While the separation between topics on Reddit is embedded in the layout of the website, the distinctions on Tumblr are maintained by fans, who have agency in which types of blogs they choose to follow, and how to curate and build their own blog's content. Tumblr's built-in "recommended blogs" feature perpetuates people to discretize and discriminate who they follow into certain categories, but is less absolute than Reddit's structure. Of course, people combat this tendency towards division on Reddit too, by subscribing to numerous forums, known as *subreddits*, in order to track discussions related to different topics of interest.

Tumblr as Social Media

Like the social network websites Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, Tumblr is based on an endless scrolling follower-feed model. This simple design feature, which allows users to scroll downward *ad infinitum*, and to be shown posts (and the occasional non-optional advertisement) which relate, originate, or circulate through chosen streams ("followers" or "friends"), was not always the norm in internet communications. In 2006, when Facebook "released the news feed...as a way of letting people find out what their Facebook friends were up to, there had been a small protest...[but] over time, users did not find news feeds too intrusive or troublesome" (Vaidhyathan 2010: 90). The endless feed model has since become an industry standard, defining the most popular social media networks.

On Tumblr, besides the follower stream, one can still see advertisements and results found using the website's search feature, and browse other's blogs. These places are the largest areas of content that can be accessed outside of the follower feed, but the feed remains the primary way to view Tumblr. Even the individual blogs themselves are presented as streams, representing posts in chronological order.

Chapter 4: Visual and Verbal Communication

Texts, the various presentations of language and symbols, are one of the many ways that humans connect to one another, to their thoughts, and to the natural world. For example, novels can summon imagery, emotion, and thought in perhaps an unparalleled way. Like many novels, the very first internet communities were composites of written language. People used internet relay chat (IRC) to converse in semi-instantaneous fashion with others about virtually anything. Players and writers created stories and worlds in ludic multi-user-dungeons (MUDs), modeled after the *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition of group role playing. Aided by images in addition to text, Animal Crossing bloggers form textual connections, interpreting and translating screen-lit symbols into emotion, thought, and meaning. I hope to stress in this section the importance of looking at the contexts surrounding blog posts, composites of written language often paired with images, and the humor, frustration, politics, and social relationships that reside therein. By inspecting a specific community expressed and realized through computers, I also hope to emphasize how mediation (whether through bodies or technology) inescapably and always enables social discourse and shouldn't necessarily be viewed as a threat to or an empty substitute for face-to-face interaction.

First let us look at what *Animal Crossing* bloggers are doing and saying online. Based on my time on AC Tumblr, I claim that it is not a monoculture of *Animal Crossing* fan activity, but rather it is embedded in a history of internet communication, while also reflecting the diverse and political lives of contributing writers. The bloggers I observed use text in three key ways: as humor; as diary or journal entry; as

advertisement for a giveaway, trade, or other such promotion. Akin to public diary entries, writers journal about the progress of their blog itself- “Today I reached 400 followers! Thank you all so much! Now , I’m going to do a giveaway of bells and in-game items so message me to enter.” The three key functions I noted are not mutually exclusive, e.g. an advertisement can double up as an observational or self-reflecting post. Bloggers also journal about their experiences playing Animal Crossing, e.g. “i feel bad about my town because i didn’t plan the map/rock/pond/house placement at all and now i feel like my towns ugly... [sic].” Bloggers also write about their ‘real lives’, (an admittedly loaded term that I will use to mean “anything not related to playing or blogging about Animal Crossing”). For instance, when the real lives of my bloggers intersected with the election of Donald Trump, this was reflected on web pages otherwise reserved for AC related topics. On that night of November 9th, 2016, anxiety rippled throughout my Tumblr feed. One of my interview respondents posted publically saying

God... I can hear my neighbours outside celebrating.. I feel physically sick.

Others reacted with a sense of humor, like one who wrote

**AGGRESSIVELY PLAYS ANIMAL CROSSING WHILE THE WORLD ENDS **

The last post presents an opportunity to analyze a particular writings technique used on AC Tumblr- the asterisk action. This writer used asterisks to denote an action being taken rather than a statement being said, a tradition going back at least 20 years to the

heydey of IRC. The usage of asterisks, the omission of the grammatical subject, and the conjugation of the predicate into the 3rd person singular together constitute a particular form which has become popular in online communication, and seems to have filled a sort of gap.

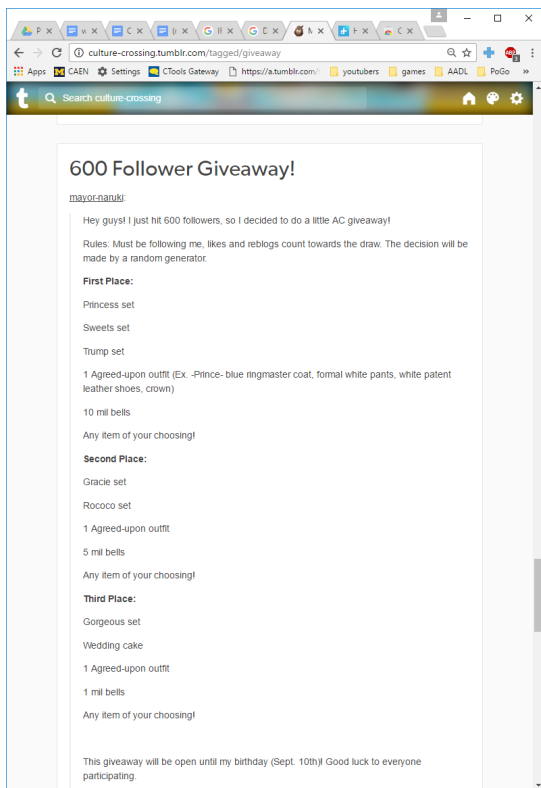


Fig 7. doing giveaways when reaching a certain follower milestone is commonplace

This gap is the one created by the absence of bodies and a plethora of text. To borrow Bateson’s framework, the tradition of the **[takes an action]** phrase type is a metacommunicative practice, the many uses of which “denote” actions, but do not denote what would be denoted by those actions (Bateson 2008: 180). By representing the action verbally, you are drawing

upon the imagination of the reader to give the action significance, context, even humor. The reader’s reaction is different than the seer’s reaction would be if someone were to actually see this action taking place, e.g. seeing somebody sitting in their beds playing Animal Crossing to vent their anger about American politics.

Another crucial gap left behind in an online context is the use of body language. Bloggers often supply GIFs and still images along with text, in situations similar to those where people might present facial or body language to evoke a certain reaction. Humor especially, being a form particularly concerned with the reaction of the listeners (or in

this case readers), comes to rely on a crucial combination of images and text in our AC community.

Memes and Humor

Here I draw on Limor Shifman to demonstrate how images are used alongside written language to achieve more intimate and stimulating connections, and to defined memes and their importance to bloggers. In the 1980's when personal computing was first taking off, visual culture was "mixing feminist and political criticism of high art with the study of popular culture" (Mirzoeff 2009: 11). Furthermore, "visual culture is something we engage in as an active way to create change, not just a way to see what is happening" (Mirzoeff 2009: 13). That is to say, we do not just absorb images from the television and internet like lifeless sponges. We grapple with and make active choices about the images and messages we consume and the conclusions we draw from them. Tumblr users face additional decisions additional decisions of whether or not to reblog an image, and if so, whether or not to add their own commentary.

One crucial format in which images circulate online is through memes, infamous for their frivolity, but important in their widespread use. Limor Shifman, a scholar in internet media and culture, argues that photo-based memes share three "over-arching principles." Here are those principles:

I. *hypersignification*, which is another way to say the memes are self-aware and self-referential. Memes thrive in an environment where they draw attention to their own meme-iness, rather than disguise their true selves behind a different form.

II. *prospective photography*, which means that photos (outside of a meme context) can be seen for their potential to be future memes. And lastly,

III. *operative signs*- memes occur in formats and environments which encourage their own reproduction. This can be achieved through simple formats, zones of exchangeability, and through software like photoshop, microsoft paint, and various websites. I will try to unpack one of these terms, *hypersignification*, using examples of a trend I've recently noticed on Tumblr- apologizing for your memes.

Hypersignification

Hypersignification is a term coined by scholars in advertising, R. Goldman and S. Papson, to represent when ads no longer tried to disguise the fact that they were ads. Some ads began to ironically draw attention to their own commerciality. As the advertising industry grew, the public became more familiar and skeptical of the authority and truth of ads. But ads which were self-deprecating and/or self-referencing could be seen as progressive, funny, and more honest. Hypersignificating forms “reveal the ‘backstage’ of their own industry” (Shifman 2014: 344).

One way that original posters (OPs) reveal the cognitive backstage of their blogging is through metadiscursive commentary. One such reflexive technique is to apologize, jokingly or otherwise, when posting a meme.

Fig 8. Meme Apology #1:



tags:

#I'm sorry guys I really am--

#WHY DID I PUT THIS THROUGH WAIFU IT'S JUST A MEME IT DOESN'T
NEED TO BE CLEAR

Why might the OP apologize here? They might realize that this meme is popular, acknowledging that the audience might be tired of seeing *yet another* meme about “dabbing,” a style of hip hop dance. The second tag might provide further insight into the apology found in the first. Waifu2x is a photo editing software that bloggers often use to enhance the otherwise low resolution screenshots taken with the Nintendo 3DS. The tag #WHY DID I PUT THIS THROUGH WAIFU IT'S JUST A MEME IT DOESN'T NEED TO BE CLEAR reinforces Shifman’s point that memes are “more about the *process* of meaning-making than about meaning itself” (her emphasis, Shifman 344). In all capital letters for contrast, the OP remarks on the strangeness, of putting effort to edit a photo that’s “just a meme.” The OP seems more interested in emphasizing that they made a meme, rather than emphasizing its specific content. The apology therefore, might be made more generally to repent for taking place in meme-making in the first place.

Fig 9. Meme Apology #2:



caption:

snillager (snail villager)

tags:

#This is dumb I'm sorry

In this case, the apologizer might think that the joke isn't funny, yet they communicate it anyway. Here the portmanteau, *snillager*, appears in caption, but the hypersignifier, *#This is dumb i'm sorry*, appears as a tag. While not one that all bloggers use consistently, this differentiation, reveals that not all text spaces on a single Tumblr post function equally. This performance reveals the thought-process behind creation is self-deprecating, but more specifically it is self-aware, self-referencing- both key components of hypersignification in action.

Fig 10. Meme #3



caption:

“Jack, I want you to draw me like one of your French girls”

tags:

#bad memes

#im sorry

Direct references to other media (often film, TV, other games) are especially salient symbols on AC Tumblr. In this case, the screenshot and its caption are representing a scene from the movie *Titanic*. The seemingly mundane tags however, and the apology within, are also effective symbols. Apologizing can be used as a tool of self-deprecating humor. This shows that the humor of meme-post as a whole consists not just of an image, but also of the reflexive commentary around it. These apologies are reflexive or “hyper”signifiers, revealing the process of meme creation and simultaneously emphasizing that process. A simple tag like *#bad memes* caricatures the self criticism of the meme-maker, and it anticipates a wide array of receptions by viewers, including a generous interpretation that sees the meme as a cliché which is charming nonetheless. Value stems from the meme’s *badness*, just as ads gain cultural leverage through recognizing their own adness.

I want to expand on Limor Shifman’s definition of hypersignification by highlighting the features of the websites used to share them. Tumblr, and certainly other sites with similar tagging and caption features like Twitter and Facebook, allows for a new form of image meme, which not only consists of the images, but of commentary about them, physically adjacent on the screen. Hypersignification takes on new dimensions when these aspects of social media are taken into account, and the meme is analyzed “in context” and not just a lone image. On Tumblr specifically, this commentary can occur in one of three places- the title text, the caption (body) text, or the tags. As displayed in meme #2, the “snillager”, *the caption* is used for the joke, and *the tags* are used for commentary about the joke. This reveals that the different areas for typing are used to achieve different but interlocking purposes. These different contexts surrounding the image are crucial for researchers of material culture, because

“meanings are not inherent in images...meanings are the product of a complex social interaction among image, viewers, and context” (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 47).

So why bring up hypersignification and memes, when my greater point is trying to show how people form communities online? The answer is because these textual practices form windows, however partial and opaque, into the minds of others, and create shared experiences which go beyond the connection that eyes share with lit screens. I am in agreement with the conceptualization of Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban that from “text-artifacts” “something of the context of entextualization can be recovered,” and furthermore that related text-artifacts can be read as a “composite cotext or intertext” (Silverstein and Urban 1996: 8). It is these cotexts which allow the proliferation of repeating forms which become traditions, whether those are memes or posts specific to a game like Animal Crossing. Memes, as a constant practice of theme-and-variation, allow for feelings of likeness, identity, and community across time and space.

Now, I do not argue that hypersignifiers in the memes which I have described are 100% representative of the the realities of creation and entextualization. No one can do something and fully express exactly what, how, and why they are doing it at the same time. But whenever people *do* choose to describe these things, it is not a neutral or innocent matter. It can succeed in an emotional pulling closer, or distancing which is at the core of human interaction.

Game as Text

Along with all video games, *ACNL* is not singular text per se, but a sequence of texts, separated by time and location, and also by author (game developers), speaker (written characters), and type (mechanical or aesthetic, imitative or instructive, etc.). Another medium, the novel, is laid out similarly with text spread across multiple pages, containing multiple characters, and read across time. The texts in game are separated by time and space but they are also united by it. By all existing on the same screen, loaded from the same cartridge, the texts of letters and colors in *ACNL* suggest a separate and isolated place altogether. The isolation of this world from the real world, or other game worlds, is not absolute and can have carry over. This mixing occurs through homage and reference in fan created media such as screenshots taken of towns in *ACNL* which depict places and scenes from movies and other game series such as *Howl's Moving Castle* or *Pokemon*.

In *ACNL*, one primary way to discover written texts is by “talking” to villagers (i.e. moving your avatar next to them and pressing the A button). Chatting with villagers imitates human communication, and is in such a form of play. Across many video games, texts also serve to provide information to the player, advance the plot (if there is one), and serve various other functions. If you send letters to Villagers in *ACNL*, they write back. If you initiate a conversation with them, they talk back. If you bring them an apple or a piece of furniture which they asked for, they give something in return. If you hit them with a shovel or a net, they will show physical discomfort on their face and body. The humanness of NPCs in *ACNL* is principally defined by their responsiveness and reciprocity. However, this anthropomorphization is not limited to the game on the

3DS. Bloggers anthropomorphize villagers on their blogs through text posts, fan art, and ultimately through discourse in verbal and visual forms.



Fig 11. A fan cartoon depicts the unwanted surprise of a poorly placed move-in (in this case, the land plot gets randomly and illogically placed on top of a brick path)

One incredibly common trope, both in text posts and fan art, is that the house of a new villager having just moved in could ruin an otherwise perfectly controlled and

manicured landscape. When you have less than 10 villagers there are open “slots” which new villagers can fill in at any time. Without changing the game’s code (i.e. hacking) you can’t choose when or where a villager will place their plot of land. This lack of control resulting from the game’s code and randomizing function becomes, to bloggers, an agent of adversity. The proxy, or public face of this agent, naturally becomes the villager. In the cartoon above, Lolly’s plot of land is placed in the middle of the road- a nonsensical and aesthetically unappealing obstruction which means the mayor will have to re-do a stretch of road, or live with an awkwardly unrealistic virtual infrastructure. Fan cartoons

express both the humor and frustration of managing a town constantly at odds with uncontrollable forces.

Mediation

It is important to think of computers and the internet as a medium. Even when two people are alongside each other, close enough to talk, they still “rely on words, images, objects, bodies, sensory textures, memories, and virtual imaginings to relate to loved ones” (Desjarlais 2016: 6). We can’t just communicate, pure and simple. We have to communicate *through* something: through our bodies, the vibrating air, or through keyboards, electricity and lit screens. Each of these modes to talk carries with it different potentials for experiences, different memories and associations, but each is equally important to understanding the fullness of human behavior.

Chapter 5: Creativity within Capitalism

Producer and Consumer

One might think of capitalist entertainment as German theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer do, as an industrial product that “no longer needs to present [itself] as art.” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972). Surely many of us in 21st century America have voiced similar gripes about the endless stream of superhero sequels or the mechanical sexiness and predictable glorification of drugs found in radio pop songs. We might reluctantly agree when Adorno and Horkheimer claim that “the truth that [media companies] are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce” (ibid.). They present a world where “all mass culture under monopoly is identical,” and while I do think we should keep in mind the historical particulars of Nazi Germany that influenced the writings of these two men, I also want to bring to attention my concern that reductive characterizations of the powerful media exist in many forms today. These characterizations can obstruct our conceptions of how media is actually consumed, remade, appreciated in real world settings. I do not want to say that “entertainment media,” taken in this case to mean the collective, both imagined and real, of all film, print, radio, television, videogame, and printed works, has no social power. Nor do I wish to dismiss the problems of capitalism because of the reductions and rhetorical contrivances that arise in its criticism. I do, however, want to examine a particular kind of interaction between *Animal Crossing*, a game designed, made and sold as a capitalist product, and a select group of players without relying on

argumentative structures concerning ‘controller vs. the controlled’, nor even ‘producer vs. consumer.’ I hope to emphasize that the identity of bloggers can not be defined through solely through Marxist analysis or, as Gershon frequently emphasizes, notions of the neoliberal self (Gershon 2011).

Let us consider a different model, less top-down and more along the lines of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony, in place of the concept of domination” (Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Power is spread out across the board and “negotiated among all classes of people”, and although it doesn’t exist equally in all classes, this model allows us to move away from one that depicts the forceful hand of media corporations acting on the passive lever of consumer culture (ibid.). For instance, when the producers of *The X-Files* “regularly monitor fan activity and often put in clues in episodes...intended for the fan viewer who is paying close attention” they are engaging with fans in a hegemonic negotiation (ibid.). Fan input, in this case, is not entirely separate from the creative process. To complicate things further, are the producers of the show, in fact, allowed to be called fans of their own show? In a long running show like X-Files, how many employees who came to work for the production team were originally just fans and viewers?

So what separates a passive receiver from a more complex agent? To give a simple answer, it is creation. Whether drawing, or writing, or even something as mundane as speech, creation gives the power to make meaning. Creation is what makes the human human, and all creation starts with the body; the mouth, the hands. Even vision is a fundamentally creative process, as reality is not absorbed by the eyes in a raw state, but is filtered down to a visible range of light between 390 to 700 nanometers,

flipped upside down and back up again, given color and memory and association and ultimately meaning. Our very senses are a form of constructing.

Why create?

Predominantly with their hands and eyes, players create worlds of play and aesthetic stories with *Animal Crossing*. They can plant trees, shrubs, bamboo, flowers. They can construct outfits from the clothing which Nintendo put in the game originally, or go a step further and design custom patterns for dresses, hats, and umbrellas. The game tools are used as resource to create items, and then those resulting products become the means to create further, by being incorporated into composite outfits or room designs. But these acts of creation are complicated and impure. They are not always done for the explicit purpose of being creative. For example, Gina told me that “the interior [of villager’s houses] isn’t as important to me because not everyone who visits your town will go to the trouble of going into every villager’s house.” She acknowledges here that at least some of her concerns with her town’s appearance are not so much founded on a sense of aesthetic unity or completeness, but are with how others may perceive her town- a result of the social connections made through Tumblr. When mca says that she “wants dreamers to have a warm, inviting, calming retreat from their everyday lives,” she is adopting the language of the service provider, like a resort manager or an arcade owner. She has become a producer, creating a town associated with a “dream address” (hence, dreamers visit there), where players can enter in a 16 digit code found online through blogs such as hers, and explore like a museum someone else’s creation. This shatters the Nintendo/player, producer/consumer binary, at least

as it was originally set up with game creators on one side and fans on another. MCA reappropriates material from Nintendo's game to create an appealing town that others can then appreciate. She is simultaneously producer and consumer, audience to Nintendo and performer for other fans. No matter how much smaller than Nintendo's audience, (*ACNL* alone sold over 10 million copies as of late September 2016) MCA's audience, her perceived relationship with them, and the digital objects through which she performs are the crucial axes through which fan relations are realized and games are made into culture.



Fig 12. Taken from one of Gina's posts. This screenshot of her town was edited for picture resolution, and to include the town's name.

Adorno and Horkheimer claimed about the radio system in 1940s Germany that “no mechanism of reply has been developed” and that “film denies its audience any

dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination.” I do not argue that everything fans do on Tumblr is seen by Nintendo, no less acknowledged and responded to. But in the everyday lives of these bloggers, their interactions with and, in essence, responses to the game which Nintendo has given them are meaningful and shape the ways that this media is incorporated into the routines, and through the machinations of *habitus*, the identities of players.

Similar to Adorno and Horkheimer’s depiction of a centralized, influential media, Louis Althusser purports a concept of *ideological state apparatus*, or institutions which inculcate those affected into social norms. Communications scholar Jin Kim draws heavily upon Althusser in his essay about *Animal Crossing* in order to argue that the game is a vehicle for perpetuating certain commercial ideologies (Kim 2014). In the final sentence of that essay, he claims that “ideologies of video games are not only pre-determined by developers but also voluntarily accepted by players” (Kim 2014: 367). Kim’s choice of focus and vocabulary dehumanizes both developer and player, in a static, rather lifeless relationship. While it is true that there is much distance between developers of a game and its players, a focus on the ways that players create and maintain material worlds of fandom online, create narratives and art, and interact with each other should produce a more lively, and I would hope fair, portrayal of AC fans at work.

Controversial works by fan creators prove that AC fans are capable of thinking outside the box of Nintendo-sanctioned kid-friendly ideology. One such creator, Jordan, posts original content that depicts intricately created, symbolically loaded scenes: a bunny Hitler stands at a podium with a swastika flag hanging behind; a topless anthropomorphized pig serves drinks at a “titty bar”; wearing a leather jacket, a wolf

manages the production of narcotics within a stereotypical meth-lab-within-a-trailer (adorned with a Confederate flag).



Fig 13. A work by Jordan. Items included in the “Meth Lab” are bunsen burners, oil drums, rows of plants, erlenmeyer flasks, kettles, pots, an oven, a sink, an oil drum, mortar and pestle, a fire extinguisher, and propane tanks. Notice the outside of the home, a metal shack, decorated with trash bags, an open can, and a lawn chair.

Understandably, Jordan has created considerable backlash within the community, not just for their work, but also for allegedly making “Nazi” and “racist comments” according to one user:

Yoo I like to stay out of drama in the acnl community, bc what the hell this is a ds game not an episode of bad girls club... but for real if any of you follow or reblog from maryjaneacnl please do me a favor and unfollow me and let me know so I can unfollow you. She has made several racists comments, Nazi qr codes, confederate flag qr code, lots of “white power” tags. And I don’t want to see that shit on my dash, this is a childrens game and everyone should be able to enjoy the game equally and not worry about that shit and I cant even believe this even needs to be addressed -__ - [sic]

This user made a post declaring that if any of their followers followed Jordan, they should come forth so that they can be unfollowed as an act of disassociation, cleansing, or perhaps even punishment. Such outreach attempts through public posts are not uncommon on Tumblr, where one has little control over how well they know followers and the bloggers they follow. Social moves, including both the polemic works of Jordan and the angry responses of other fans, are indicative of the significance of fan power and the overlooked political work that goes into the construction of ideology in people’s daily lives. Corporations and powerful institutions do not have to be directly involved for the creation of these complex identities. They are merely one piece out of many.

Conclusion

My participant observation on Tumblr, my multiple identities as both a watcher and doer paralleled the multiple identities of AC bloggers. Overlapping spheres of ritual— blogger and player, creator and consumer— lie at the heart of these people’s lives. Time spent blogging online and the relationships forged therein are no less real for being virtual. Objects that appear on a screen are authentic and actual because they are manipulated, shared, and become symbols through discourse and presentation. The same discourse used to interact with and circulate objects is also the stream wherein personal identities mix with powerful ideologies of gender and media, language and play. In this online realm, the physical body is often forgotten, but without it this culture of bloggers would not exist. Bodies and technology, or more precisely the interface between the two, constitutes the medium through which social relations are cultivated. Like a small village, our lives are constantly made and maintained through the work of the self and the works of others.

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