Chapter 8.

Pandemic Play: Making home through lockdown and animal crossing – new horizons

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Biography

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Abstract

The video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*ACNH*) was released for the Nintendo Switch console 20 March 2020, four days after Victoria, Australia, amongst many other locales, declared a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What resulted were periods of time when people were instructed to stay in their places of residence. The forced dwelling and isolation from other meaningful places created a challenge; how could we explore and make home when these realms had so suddenly and drastically been altered?

Playing ACNH enabled me to make place virtually and make sense of this particularly uncertain time through its focus on customisation, community and cosiness. Reflecting on excerpts from my short story *Anchovy* (2021), I measure the depths of home in lockdown and ACNH relying on the five components of at-homeness outlined by David Seamon as warmth, rootedness, appropriation, at-easeness, and regeneration (2015, p. 70). Braiding creative and theoretical thinking, I illustrate how I played with the rules of both lockdown and home.

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Introduction

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Home & Play

> In bed last night Mark was crushed up against me and my toenails kept scraping against the wall. All I could think was please don't scratch these walls, they are not yours to ruin. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

During the first Victorian lockdown I moved in temporarily with my boyfriend Mark who rented an apartment down the road from my share house. The temporal aspects of this living arrangement complicated the making of home; how to make this apartment my own knowing it won't be mine forever?

And yet, no housing situation is a promise of forever, and a house isn't necessarily a home. Place is understood as a phenomenon made out of space, a 'person-or-people-experiencing-place,' rather than the physical environment (Seamon, 2013, p. 150). Place can be distinguished from a physical location just as the term home can be separated from house. House is material structure, whereas the experience of home is the relationship between the abstract and material.

This distinction became relevant during the pandemic as one of the large humanitarian threats to our physical locales including health crises, natural disasters, war and displacement. Additionally, those without housing may be accustomed to moving locales often, rentals exist at the financial whims of landlords and even those who can buy property must contend with sky-rocketing prices and mortgages.

On my ACNH island I had none of these issues (besides my villagers occasionally catching a cold). Tom Nook let me build a house and although I was indebted to him there was no deadline to repay him. I could not be evicted and was incentivised to pay so that I could make further renovations to the house to embody my identity. I painted the walls my favourite colours, picked a mailbox type, filled rooms with useful, attractive and sentimental objects. I spent time with villagers and invited real world loved ones to visit me virtually. I attempted to make home.

Video games are inherently mediums of space defined by their spatiality since their inception (Meinel, 2022, p. 1) and therefore invaluable for understanding the process of making home. ACNH's focus on domesticity, the everyday and community makes it thematically and mechanically fruitful for making place out of space. Coupled with the activity of play, which subverts norms and identities and 'keeps a species flexible,' (Flanagan, 2009, p. 5) playing ACNH felt appropriate in the face of such a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

Yet, in the newly shared bed at Mark's apartment, my body did not yet know how to make space for itself. I knew it would take time for it to become familiar, to feel I have the right to ruin the walls and imbue the space with elements of myself.

Warmth

> You, human, arrive at a deserted island, and begin building a town and filling it with animal neighbours. Tom Nook, a racoon-dog, guides you as you replace your tent with a house, plant flowers, build bridges, open up a shop. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

Animal Crossing is defined as a *cosy* game franchise, with the main tenents being 'safety, abundance, and softness,' (Waszkiewicz, 2022, p. 72) notably the elements we typically desire in our homes, and ones I undoubtedly felt in the apartment. Although *warmth* is one of Seamon's attributes of at-homeness he acknowledges that it is absent in many homes. Nevertheless, he describes warmth as 'an atmosphere of friendliness, concern and support,' (2015, p. 84). ACNH adheres to the tenets of warmth through its cosiness, expressed in its relaxed gameplay, low difficulty, slow pacing and its cute visuals and mechanics, all of which were 'a satisfactory counter-balance to the increased stress and the overwhelm,' of lockdown periods (Waszkiewicz, 2022, p. 71).

> There's a lot of time now, to think and take stock and be *productive*, but mostly to recognise the sort of dampened fear within my body. But sometimes, in those few seconds before I feel anything, I'm able to switch on *Animal Crossing*. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

During periods of lockdown the game captured people's instinct 'to escape from realistic difficulties,' (Zhu, 2020, p. 2) through gameplay consisting of planting flowers and becoming friends with anthropomorphic animal villagers. These qualities fulfilled a desire to escape, yet arguably could not provide a full escape from the pressures of lockdown life. Rather, the cuteness of cosy games 'dislodges the heaviness and constraints of (productive) life.' (Allison, 2004, p. 40). Playing through cosiness in ACNH proved a way of grappling with my material conditions because 'the softness and gentleness of this world re-codes and transforms these pressures.' (Rose, 2023, p. 301).

The game contains capitalist and colonialist themes; the premise of uninhabited land to build on and appropriate to my own desires and abiding by a currency system fuelling my need to earn and pay off

debts (Binkley, 2024, p. 58). While industrial capital is fantastically thematic to ACNH, it is nonetheless 'loaded with material significance' (May & Hall, 2024, p. 2).

Rootedness

> There's a lot to worry over but not a whole bunch to do about it. In *Animal Crossing* it is the exact opposite. There's always something to do, but if you can't get it done no one will be hurt, no one will die. The town continues to grow, to not just *survive,* but *thrive*. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

As opposed to other place settings, home, by its very nature, has a special function of being the background of the everyday. This *rootedness* is described by Seamon as 'the power of home to organise the habitual, bodily stratum of the person's lived-space' (2015, p. 79). Through the everyday, we are immersed in place, beginning to see it as an extension of the self. Typically, this world of everyday experience is not brought to the fore unless there is a distinct shift within it, when the ties between person and home become stressed through change (2015, p. 70).

The pandemic unfortunately caused 'abrupt change to the structure of everyday life,' and therefore distorted our perceptions of home and place (Waszkiewicz, 2022, p. 71). The lockdown experiences renewed interest in the phenomenon of home as one of fragility when typically, 'place is permanent and hence reassuring to man, who sees frailty in himself and chance and flux everywhere' (Tuan, 1977, p. 154).

ACNH mirrors real-world time. This was comforting as most quests were not time-sensitive and added to the relaxing pace of the game. There is noticeably no win-state or end to the game which reflected the fact that the pandemic also did not have a deadline (Comerford, 2021, p. 105). ACNH enforced how the everyday creates home, as 'a place where every day is multiplied by all the days before it' (Tuan, 1977, p. 144).

Yet these temporal mechanics also kept players heavily rooted in reality and at times cruelly aware of time passing. If the game had not been booted up for a while villagers will say they've missed me, sometimes stating the exact number of days I've been away. Sometimes they would be upset about it. I would walk into my house and tiny animated cockroaches scampering across the floor would also indicate that days have passed. Sometimes ACNH would reflect real-world time, others, it would feel like my real-world clock was anchored in island time.

> The not-doing is how we help each other, so we might as well get fossils appraised at the museum. Might as well be louder, more consistent on the internet. Take Mark's phone away so that we can truly disappear into a crap, early season of *Survivor.* New symptoms, less resources. Gather wood to build a rustic coffee table. Cry at the window, just a little. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

Play is not pure escapism from the real world. Rather, 'when we play, we engage fully and intensely with life and its contents' (Bogost, 2016, p. xii). I began to feel how soft the boundaries were between the virtual and the real. There was no distinction between me and my avatar as we both cried at the window and gathered wood. It illustrates that 'reality isn't "left behind" by games, but it is re-formatted' (Murphy, 2004, p. 230). Through playing I discerned the aspects of ACNH which helped me feel at-home in Mark's apartment, and those which created barriers to this experience.

> Sometimes he asks me to play it as he falls asleep. The music is soothing, but I know he enjoys the squeaky gibberish when my animal neighbours speak to me. He mimics them with his eyes closed, smiling. One day I hope he will visit my town, after I've expanded my home and made a room for him. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

The island town was such a part of my everyday, the play space so important to me, that renovating my house to make space for Mark felt necessary, especially as I had come to feel a sense of rootedness in our living arrangement. Likewise, the virtual world leaks into the real, as was the case when audio from ACNH entered into our sleeping space. As opposed to my initial experience in bed, I began feeling comfortable enough there to play my console beside Mark. The portability of the Nintendo Switch leant itself well to this as ACNH could be played anywhere in the apartment, (Comerford, 2021, p. 105) but

even this technology has roots stretching back to its home dock, where it returns nightly for charging. I made myself comfortable in this space by taking up room through play.

The embodied experience of play is crucial for connecting the real with the virtual, as gamer identification 'sutures the gamer to the game and in doing so, the gamer and the game being played become intertwined' (Murphy, 2004, p. 235). Place researchers have described how bodies make place similarly; Merleau-Ponty writes of *flesh*, the overlapping of body and world through 'sinews' which are at once physical and metaphysical, (Carman, 2019, p. 77) and Seamon describes the 'intertwined invisible threads' connecting home and person (2015, p. 70).

Appropriation

> I see my cousins when they visit my town. My cousin Joseph's villager once arrived with *PPE*. I laughed with a sick feeling, and then asked where he got it (he shook it from a tree). Later on when I find my own mask I feel too guilty to wear it. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

Anywhere objects can be stored has the ability to reflect identities, such as changing the wallpaper, flooring, and layout as a reflection of taste and for the ease of the body moving through the space. Seamon refers to this as appropriation, 'a sense of possession and control' (2015, p. 80). It refers not just to having the authority to place things in space, but also to determine rules about who can enter this space.

ACNH is a semi-open social game, meaning other players could visit my island granted I had invited them and my airport gates were open. Through these safeguards the game avoids the pitfalls of interacting with strangers which are prominent in mega multiplayer online games (Tong et al., 2021). This social mechanic bridged many gaps left open during lockdowns. In ACNH, airplanes were still in service and I could virtually invite loved ones over and visit their islands at a time when most air travel and spending time together was banned. There was a comforting intimacy in spending time with loved ones by showing off my town, inviting them into my house, and particularly when they would pretend to sleep in my bed –

arguably one of the biggest signs of comfort in a physical space as ‘the space for sleeping can be understood as a smaller home within the home, a home for the self’ (Angelova, 2010, p. 48). Crucially, sleeping comfortably implies an absence of ‘fear or threat’ (Seamon, 2015, p. 82).

Some interactions, like my cousin visiting wearing a face mask, pulled me out of the fantasy, particularly at a time when civilians were told not to buy masks during a shortage in health care contexts. And yet, many participants put ‘masks on their avatars much as they did in real life’ (Tong et al., 2021, p. 16).

At a time when social distancing was required the act of other players pretending to distance themselves from my avatar struck me as significant. My loved ones were no longer features of my physical world but existed in a digital vacuum through phones, laptops, voices detached from feeling, moving bodies. ACNH gave me opportunities to see them move throughout the world, even sometimes reflecting their identities in their gestures, the clothes they wore, the way they customised their avatars.

> He stockpiles all the yellow items for when he visits me, and I keep the pink things for him; umbrellas, rugs, clocks, shoes. In this way we slowly furnish our homes, change our appearances so that our avatars may feel sane, safe, and able to operate in the world. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

Similarly, feedback mechanics deepened my embodied relationship with the house and its objects; I could switch lights on and off, play instruments, sit in chairs, and sleep in a bed. There was a feedback loop created between my virtual body and the way it constellated space with objects.

> We decided I would stay here at Mark's, in a room we have called the *nest,* where I write, and video-chat my family, and when that quiet panic comes again, tend to my virtual village. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

Turning space into place is to make use of the material objects around us, in a way that the furnishings of a home can become an extension of ourselves. It permits us ‘a radical access to material objects and allows us to treat these objects as extensions of our own body’ (Seamon & Mugerauer, 1985, p. 219). The

same way I felt ownership over the spare room in the apartment, I created my own rules around objects and people on my island.

At-Easensss

> I only have two friends on my island, but they are loyal and very quick to give me gifts. They tell me how cool and nice I am all the time. In the game no one can really hate you because you don't have enough agency to hurt feelings or embarrass yourself. Sometimes they will watch me fishing and clap when I catch something, even if it's just a tiny anchovy. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

The anthropomorphic animal villagers on my island became part of my feelings of *at-easeness* during gameplay. In addition to their visual cuteness which follow the design principles of kawaii characterisation with 'clean lines, primary colours, simple shapes,' (Rose, 2023, p. 301) villagers are programmed to exist in a way that reflects at-homeness through their perceived love and acceptance of players. In this way, the person who feels at-easeness 'can manifest all sides of himself and fear no repercussions; he can be as foolish, negative, or loving as he wishes' (Seamon, 2015, p. 83).

Even though villagers are pre-programmed they give the illusion of being part of players' everyday lives, something that felt missing during lockdown as we couldn't be part of our wider communities as we would usually. Villagers display acts of kindness through animated movements which react to players, sometimes 'cheering for success (such as catching a fish),' or expressing concern 'when a player is in danger (such as being pursued by a swarm of wasps)' (Rose, 2023, p. 306).

Despite feeling as at-ease as I could, given the circumstances of lockdown, I was finding it difficult to make home in Mark's apartment because a key characteristic had been taken away. The apartment was no longer the anchorage amongst a web of meaningful places, but the *only* place, when typically they are 'bound together by the itineraries of their inhabitants… places exist not in space but as nodes in a matrix of movement' (Ingold, 2022, p. 219). Seamon similarly asserts that our dwelling-place acts as 'the spatial

centre,' when people are 'familiar and comfortable with a geographical world extending beyond the dwelling-place' (2015, p. 70).

Regeneration

> Before the severe lockdowns I had dinner with my cousins. We felt it then, that it was the last time. We were full of guilt and trying not to hug each other. Joseph and Dan cooked roast lamb and ten different sides. (Huq, 2021, p. 8)

Much like real-world place settings my island house felt more comfortable and reflective of my identity the more time I spent in it. Yet, I believe the house did not sufficiently have one of Seamon's characteristics of home; both physical and psychological regeneration (2015, p. 82). We become anchored in home through cycles of regeneration, comfort and ritual. Just as important as physically navigating space into place is the ability to be nourished in certain locales. Seamon writes that we become grounded in place because 'we are bodily and emotional beings' who must move in space and develop emotional attachments (2015, p. 96).

The ACNH house acted as a place to store my things, and I would often return to restock. Aside from this element the biological activities often associated with regeneration such as sleeping, bathing and eating, felt absent from my house activities. Unlike other video games similarly interested in domesticity such as *The Sims* (2000), my avatar did not have biological needs.

Food features prominently in cosy gaming, where cosiness not only 'manifests through food within the video game world,' but also becomes associated with certain locations and rituals in-game (Waszkiewicz, 2022, p. 86). ACNH allowed me to eat food to gain temporary strength to break rocks and uproot trees. I built food at the workbench the same way I built furniture and displayed it in my house like a showroom. As a result, food practices did not 'help bring back memories and past experiences through nostalgic

bonds conveying the memory of people, places or events' (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014, p. 229). Nostalgic, bodily and ritualistic relationships with food were mostly absent.

A lack of hunger built on the low-stress of the gameplay but struck me as a barrier to feeling at-home. Home, created through the body, cannot be separated from this experience as 'it is difficult to discuss food and eating in isolation from the body that eats' (Waszkiewicz, 2022, p. 11).

However, there were parallels between the real and virtual. The same way I did not feel regenerated in my island house, I did not feel it in the real-world apartment. Despite having an abundance of food, running water, a growingly more comfortable bed, there was nowhere to return home from, no outside world to regenerate in response to.

> My cousin Sarita steals all the roast potato, and we fight each other off from the dish while trying not to touch. When her villager first arrived in my town her face was busted-up and swollen. It's what happens when you shake trees and can't catch the wasps in time. I make her follow me to the shop I've recently helped build, where I purchase medicine from two smaller racoon-dogs. It heals her instantly. (Huq, 2021, p. 9)

Outside of severe lockdowns were grades of social and hygiene protocols of keeping apart, wearing masks, socialising outside, and not touching too many things. If we use our bodies to inhabit space and make it place these rules meant that my abilities to do so were severely limited. Opportunities for understanding and being close to others were minimal. Yet in ACNH, there was freedom to not only use our virtual bodies to navigate space, but to navigate it together.

Much like the absence of satiating hunger in ACNH I could pretend to shower and sleep in a bed, but the actions do not affect the gameplay. Yet, when a wasp chases players the console vibrates, and if escape is impossible the wasp will sting, resulting in a change of appearance through sad facial expressions and welts. By using medicine to cure Sarita's avatar I was able to express care physically, something we could not do during the pandemic.

Rules

> When you are luring in a fish the console will vibrate at differing intensities, depending on the size of the fish. If you're trying for a large one, like a shark or a whale, it will rumble violently in your hands. I make sure to only go for the small fish when Mark sleeps. (Huq, 2021, p. 9)

There were many rules created during lockdown which changed rapidly and frequently. A characteristic of play is that it allows 'an excuse for setting up and respecting these arbitrary limitations, and working with them' (Hern, 2016). Even children playing house 'seem implicitly to be recognizing that having a home is something that one must learn to do, that one can do in different styles' (Jacobson, 2009, p. 363).

Through playing ACNH I gained the confidence to play with the rules of the apartment, such as gaming when Mark slept. Rules are crucial for home as 'without the rules the home is not a home, it is a house' (Wood & Beck, 2014, p. 173). The real and virtual blended together, making Mark content the same way I did my villagers whenever I caught fish. The sounds and 'force feedback motors' of the console not only deepened my 'identification with my player-character' (Murphy, 2004, p. 232), but entered my physical world becoming 'saturated with and changed by the events occurring within a game and to my avatar' (p. 230). Play defined and helped me question the rules of home during lockdown.

Conclusion

Home was needed during lockdown for safety and distance from the outside world, but without the other structures which make home special our relationships with it change. If I felt home playing ACNH, it was walking around my village, in the streets and forests and beaches, interacting with animal villagers and virtual loved ones alike. The experience of playing ACNH and trying to make home during lockdown not

only highlighted the fragility of home but emphasised the importance of recognising and creating home in locales outside of our dwelling places.

We cannot so quickly distinguish the importance of real and physical worlds with virtual and digital ones, just as home cannot be separated from other places. Eventually I did find home in Mark's apartment, ironically, when I moved back into my share house, after the lockdowns were done and I could see it in reference to other places, in the context of the outside world. Yet, playing ACNH during this time provided me with an understanding that at-homeness, especially in the face of rising housing inequality, can be found in a town, virtual or otherwise, as long as we are willing to tend to it for ourselves and others.

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