

Research Article

Cátia Ferreira, Carla Ganito*, Soraia Gonçalves

Digital Games as Safe Places: The Case of Animal Crossing

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2024-0033>

received March 14, 2024; accepted October 25, 2024

Abstract: Digital games have become a popular cultural pastime and a profitable media industry, with an average player age of 32. During the lockdown years, the many facets of digital games came to light, particularly their capacity to encourage the development of safe spaces for interaction and communities. Games that encourage creativity and content creation, like Second Life, Animal Crossing, and Minecraft, for example, give users a variety of safe spaces to express themselves and grow creatively. The article addresses the function of video games as safe spaces using a mixed-methods approach, emphasizing the role played during the pandemic and using Animal Crossing as an example. Three primary techniques for gathering data were an online survey, netnography, and document analysis. Through the Animal Crossing: New Horizons case study, we were able to confirm that players do, in fact, view the game as more than just a way to pass the time. They make expressive and proactive use of it, deriving immense pleasure from producing and disseminating content that is uniquely personalized for them. It is a tool for escapism and provides a feeling of belonging to players who agree that the New Horizons Fan Community is a united, helpful, caring, and generous community.

Keywords: digital games, safe places, community, creativity, animal crossing

1 Introduction

Since their debut in the 1970s, the digital game industry has undergone significant change. The first games, such as Pong and Hunt the Wumpus, offered players a new space to get entertained. Despite the possibility offered to engage with different genres of games, mainly action and adventure ones were popular during the industry's first decade. Technology has advanced over the past 50 years, enabling games to change and providing players with a variety of experiences. Even so, despite providing multifaceted entertainment experiences, digital games are still primarily linked to leisure activities.

In the last decade, the digital games industry has asserted itself as the most valuable media industry, generating revenues of \$184 and with the number of players worldwide reaching 3.38 billion in 2023 (NewZoo, 2023). In 2022 in Europe, 53% of the population between the ages of 6 and 64 played digital games, 32 was the average age of players, 76% of video game players were 18 years or older, and 46.7% of European game players were women (EGDF, 2022). Among European Video Game Players, 74% play at least one hour per week, and on average, people in Europe spend 9 h per week playing video games (EGDF, 2022). The latest report by the European Game Developers Federation also evinced that for the great majority of players, games offer more

* **Corresponding author: Carla Ganito**, Research Centre for Communication and Culture, Human Sciences School, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, Portugal, e-mail: carla.ganito@ucp.pt

Cátia Ferreira, Soraia Gonçalves: Research Centre for Communication and Culture, Human Sciences School, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, Portugal

than just entertainment experiences; the number of projects associated with the use of games for health or education, for instance, has been increasing.

The relevance of digital games was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in 2020, they were one of the most popular activities. From March to June 2020, the increase in time spent playing digital games worldwide was 39% and the most popular games during this period were multiplayer (Clement, 2024a). Games were particularly relevant during lockdowns; according to a survey of European gaming audiences (Ipsos MORI, 2020), 3 in 10 players say video games have helped them to feel happier, less anxious, and isolated. During the full lockdown in April 2020, 29% of players agreed that video games were relevant to their mental health. One in five players played more video games online with friends, family, or other players during the lockdown and that provided them support during that uneasy period of time.

Digital games may assume the double role of escaping from reality and extending players' social connections. For both, the ability of games to foster the formation of play communities (Pearce, 2009) is key. Play communities offer a safe place within a chosen alternative fictional world. Besides sharing a game and a style of playing, play communities' members tend to share perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs, as members of other types of virtual communities do. Also at the heart of the gaming experience are fan communities, most of which integrate play communities. Games fan communities tend to be creative communities looking for different creative forms of expression comprising the production of different types of content. Games that foster content production, such as *Minecraft*, *Animal Crossing*, or *Second Life*, for instance, offer players different opportunities to express themselves and to expand their creativity in a safe place – safe at least from the common constraints and challenges to creative practices present in first life, such as deadlines, budgets, or resources.

Based on a mixed-methods approach, the article discusses the role performed by digital games as safe places, taking into account the particular case of *Animal Crossing*. *Animal Crossing* was launched in March 2020 and was immediately a commercial success, selling 13.4 million units during the first six weeks after its launch (Clement, 2024a). The research focuses on the role played by this game for its players during the pandemic. The data collection methods of the research are document analysis, netnography, and an online survey.

The article is organized in three sections. The first intending discusses how the social construction of places occurs within digital games. The second one focuses on how digital games may be perceived as safe places, mainly in periods of times where safety in non-games environments may not be taken for granted, as in the COVID-19 pandemic. The third and last section will be centered on the presentation of the case of *Animal Crossing*, based on the results from the empirical research. The final section will be divided into three subsections: data collection methods, *Animal Crossing* contextualization, survey results, discussion, and limitations.

2 The Social Construction of Places in Digital Games

The analysis of spatiality in game environments has been well documented by game studies' scholars (von Borries & Böttger, 2007). Space and place-making are considered inevitable in virtual 3D worlds, and its digital territories are even characterized as “allegories of space: they pretend to portray space in ever more realistic ways but rely on their deviation from reality in order to make the illusion palpable” (Aarseth, 2007, p. 47).

According to Tuan (1977), both space and place result from our experiences and the negotiations established with the surrounding environment. Nevertheless, the relationship established with space and place is different, and Tuan (1977) considers space to be more abstract than place: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (p. 6). This means that space becomes a place by being structured and by acquiring meaning, meaning that may be subjective and individualistic or collectively shared by a community. Lefebvre (1974) proposes that space is produced through a “conceptual triad”: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Spatial practice is the result of using social spaces with specific goals. Representations of space are outcomes of the conceptualized space: “the

space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent” (p. 38). Representational space, on the other hand, emerges from the relationship established between spatial practice and representations of space, in the sense that it is formed through experience. And according to Lefebvre (1974), “(social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products; rather, it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” (p. 73). Then, space is not abstract; it is socially produced, and “spatialization” is an active creation. It is both a product and a medium. de Certeau (1984) also considers it difficult for space to be abstract (117).

Durkheim, on the other hand, regards space as socially shaped (Schroer, 2020). In his theory of modernity, space plays a key role since it is one of the elements that allow understanding the passage from simple societies to complex ones, from clans to nation-states (Durkheim, 1893, 1915, 1950). Space is seen as an elementary category of thought (Durkheim, 1912, pp. 9–11), but it is closely related to territory and spatial organization: “Space is territory, if only a territory that has been made intelligible by the action of a social intellect” (Jiménez, 2003, p. 138).

Following the ideas proposed by Lefebvre, Tuan, de Certeau, and Durkheim, it may be considered that space, representational space, and place are key concepts to understand the spatial engagement that players experience during gameplay, particularly in open-ended virtual worlds, since those encourage geographic exploration and, sometimes, the experience of its spaces. Place is defined by the experience of those who inhabit it (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2010). The transformation of space into place occurs through its organization (de Certeau, 1984); when space becomes structure, emotions tend to be attached to it; it gains meaning (Bardzell & Odom, 2008; Tuan, 1977). Space is then pre-ordered, “situated as the act of a present (or of a time) and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117), but undoubtedly a cultural phenomenon. Representational space is the result of a more personal relationship with space, an in-between stage between the “pre-ordered” space and “ordered” places. Places are the realization of the lived experience within the representational space, since it is the lived experiences that give the opportunity to control and appropriate space.

Ferreira (2012) proposes that these categories may be applied to virtual worlds, being essential to understand the relationship established between players and the game space. Due to immersion, users tend to attribute meaning to the different visited locations, being the transformation of spaces into places almost inevitable in these alternative worlds. Following de Certeau’s proposal, the constitution of virtual space may be understood as the result of joining human creativity, technology, and the desire for space control. Nevertheless, the “cybernetic society” emerging within some game spaces tends not to be “self-moving and technocratic” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 136), but rather creative and participative ones, where players have a close relationship with the territory and its different locations. In virtual worlds, both space and place are culturally produced through player-generated space narratives, narratives that emerge through the use of design and technology to “contrive and control a space for utterly free and self-governing action” (Malaby, 2009, p. 2). It is the relationship established with the virtual spaces and places that defines individual “stories” within these alternative spheres. While in the virtual world, players feel free to explore, socialize, and build, almost forgetting that game spaces are proprietary and, as such, controlled by their owners.

Place-making in virtual worlds plays an important role; once within them, social interaction is primarily structured around space and spatiality. Gordon (2008) proposes that space’s centrality in digital environments is a crucial feature because it “spatializes” digitally mediated communication (p. 201).

Social interaction is vital for the ability to feel emotionally connected with a digital game setting. Despite making available environments where users are able to be either socially active or isolated, the potential interaction with others is one of the distinctive characteristics of massive multiplayer online games in general. Due to the importance of social interaction for the complexity and persistence of these virtual worlds, Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) suggest that they should be perceived as “third places” (Oldenburg) for informal sociability (p. 886).

Oldenburg (1989) argues that daily life should be balanced between three dimensions of experience: the domestic (the first place), the work (the second place), and the social (the third place). The third place is the new public sphere, which may be perceived as being organized around what Soja (1996) proposes as the “trialectics of spatiality.” Soja (1996) argues that in order to make sense of the complexity of contemporary public spaces, one needs to understand them as resulting from the combination of three types of spaces: the

conceived, the perceived, and the lived spaces. This hybridization of space rejects the duality of firstspaces and secondspaces and their restricted and antagonistic perspectives of space as only being material or subjectively constituted. Thirdspace involves a space within which “everything comes together ... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, [...] the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history” (Soja, 1996, pp. 56–57). Thirdspaces are in-between spaces resulting from the effects of a changing culture. Despite not being physical spaces, virtual worlds have a geographical dimension, which indicates that the users conceive space as being “material.” To fully immerse themselves, users must willingly suspend disbelief and subjectively imagine the space they inhabit through avatars. And virtual worlds become cultural spaces when users get socially engaged with each other and develop networks of belonging.

In the following section, we will discuss the role of games as safe places, particularly during times of uncertainty, as the ones lived during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

3 Digital Games as Safe Places

Digital games are media environments with safety as a central design element (Crawford, 1984). Independently from the game genre, players find safety to explore and engage with the gameworld apart from the constraints of first life. Digital games are then spaces, and in some cases places, for experimentation and acting without regard for the consequences of the actions, because replayability is also part of the experience.

Nevertheless, safety is configured also in other types of experiences lived within these virtual environments, in particular in multiplayer ones. Safety is also related to the possibility of belonging – not only to a virtual community in the first place, but also to play communities and even to fan communities.

From a sociological point of view, a community is a group of people that live in a shared location or that share something considered important by all members. Among the different conceptualizations of community, those proposed by Ferdinand Tönnies, Benedict Anderson, and Zygmunt Bauman show how the concept has evolved throughout history and also that even though there is not a consensus regarding what is a community, the term remains useful (Baym, 2010). Tönnies (1887) argues that the premises underlying the constitution of communities are spatial proximity, consanguinity, and a way of life, while that underlying the existence of societies is the existence of common goals. Communities are proposed as being a more instinctive form of people coming together and societies as a more rational and functional one. Anderson (1983), on the other hand, considers that there is nothing organic about communities; they emerge from shared rituals and practices. Therefore, he suggests the concept of “imagined communities” to characterize the communities that emerged from the convergence of capitalism with print technology during the 1800s and 1900s (Anderson, 1983). Communities are considered to be imagined once the sense of belonging shared among their members is constructed through sociocultural narratives; rituals, traditions, and other cultural practices are part of what ties a community together. Zygmunt Bauman’s (2003), in turn, reflects upon the role of communities in our liquid modernity – community as a refuge, a place where we feel safe. Bauman (2003) considers that a community is built upon interaction and sharing among its members. These three perspectives highlight that social communities are based on preconditions. These preconditions are not fixed; they have been adjusted to fit modern societies’ needs and take into account the fact that contemporary life is becoming more individual and less shaped by communal practices (Bauman, 2000, 2003, 2005; Giddens, 1991). Some of the main preconditions that frame communities are the persistence of members’ identities, a shared narrative, the existence of social conventions, common interests, a collective rationality, a shared geographical location, and the continuity of the group over time (Becker & Mark, 2002; Giddens, 1990; Kollock, 1998; Kollock & Smith, 1998). Notwithstanding, the “massification” of networked technologies has been changing most social, cultural, and economic structures. More and more, it is possible to interact not only with people from all over the world, with whom one may never have face-to-face contact, but also with different people in different online locations, in real time. Mediated communication allows us not only to reach different places but also to reach people regardless of geographical distance (Baym, 2010).

Our social networks can now be expanded and diversified due to mobile and computer-mediated forms of communication. Within cyberspace, internauts seek not only the comfort of public spaces that foster interaction and group formation but also ideal spaces for individual practices that, despite being public, are part of users' private lives. Online communication is, then, nurturing proximity through different types of social platforms, and as Rheingold (1996) emphasizes, “[w]hen a group of people remain in communication with one another for extended periods of time, the question of whether it is a community arises” (p. 418). When reflecting upon the personal connections people establish in the digital age, Baym (2010) proposes that “different technological platforms do lend themselves to different sorts of group formations, and differences in digital affordances lead to differences in group behavior” and that “the mere existence of an interactive online forum is not community” (p. 74).

Social platforms lead to different group formations according to their nature and main characteristics. Nevertheless, it may be argued that virtual communities are more easily established through platforms that offer rich interaction and communication experiences. The more interactive and collaborative the platform, the higher the possibility of it being used to foster communities. So, it seems that virtual communities are getting organized around similar preconditions to those existing in first life. At first glance, a major difference between online and offline communities is rapidly identified – the sharing of a geographical location. However, despite being digital, cyberspace is perceived by most of its users as “material” (Baym, 2010, p. 75). As in first life, virtual communities' longevity is based on sharing, trust, and establishing close interpersonal relationships (Castronova, 2005; Smith, 2010; Song, 2009; Taylor, 2006).

In multiplayer games, players tend to form communities, which are organized around common goals: to improve avatar skills and to reach a certain goal, be it to reach the next level, to defeat a certain monster, or to complete a particular task, for instance. These communities can exist in two dimensions: within the magic circle and outside the magic circle (Huizinga, 1949) in games' metaculture (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). The metaculture in this sense concerns the extension of a particular gaming culture beyond the gamespace. Cyberspace offers the opportunity to reinforce a game's metaculture in different ways, all performing the role of extra spaces where the relationship between the members of the community and the game is fostered. Then, games' metaculture takes shape in reunion spaces out of the gamespace, like, for instance: web and/or social media pages – the different tools and platforms available online contribute to the communities' longevity, some of which “survive” the games where they were developed; *modding* – some communities create *mods* to create alternative reunion spaces; the experience of creating a mod is by itself an important cooperative experience that tends to strengthen the community ties; beta-testers – meetings/reunions of beta-testers; and professional players – e-sports tournaments and championships.

Play communities were first defined by Koven (1978). The members of a play community share a solid social relationship and a similar play style, which tends to be inclusive and flexible, to be extensible to all the players. Play communities are neither new nor exclusive to the Internet (Pearce, 2009). These communities can be witnessed in different environments that bring together a group of individuals with the same interests, such as chess clubs, or in digital spaces such as Dungeons & Dragons, among other spaces that provide a common enthusiasm.

Pearce (2009) has chosen the term “communities of play” by contrast with the expression “communities of practice”: “a community of practice is defined as a group of individuals who engage in a process of collective learning and maintain a common identity defined by a shared domain of interest or activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991).” (p. 5). Despite play being a type of practice, the term implies that communities of play have their own specificities regarding how they are formed and maintained, in particular in the context of play occurring in digital environments.

Communities of play are part of participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2009). Within these cultures, the audience is not “just” a content consumer; it can take advantage of production models as *produsage* (Bruns, 2008) and contribute to and interact with content in different ways.

Participatory culture takes shape through different dynamics. The first are affiliations, implying memberships, formal and informal, and online communities centered around various forms of media, like Facebook, Youtube, Flickr, forums, or gaming clans. The second are expressions, meaning the production of new creative forms of expression, such as digital sampling, *skinning*, *modding*, fan video making, fan fiction writing, fanzines, or mash-ups. The third is collaborative problem-solving – collaborative work, formal or informal,

to complete tasks and develop new knowledge. And the fourth, and last one, are circulations, which means shaping the flow of media by the use of content sharing platforms, podcasting, or blogging to make content available in alternative or new media.

One way of affiliation, expression, collaborative problem-solving, and circulation is fandom: “what we today describe as a ‘fan’ is the contemporary articulation of a necessary relationship which has historically constituted the popular, involving relationships to such diverse things as labour, religion, morality and politics” (Grossberg, 1992, p. 63). Fandom gained new importance with the assertion of participatory cultures. Jenkins (2006) believes that actually there is a different perspective of what is a fan. The change is due to the fact that the convergence of culture has led the creative industries to develop a new relationship with fans. Currently, they are considered one of the main variables for the success of a given entertainment product. In the context of convergence culture, fans are fundamental to the way culture operates, as digital media allow fans to appropriate and redirect content consumed quickly, thus creating new forms of interaction with the media they value (Jenkins, 2006). Due to the expansion of play and fan communities, we have been witnessing greater visibility of their participation in various events that cultivate a safe space without social discrimination, fostering the sharing of creative performances. These practices have had greater predominance in the different types of media that accompany them. An example of role play that has gained popularity worldwide is cosplay (Pearce, 2009). Likewise, network (online) games have created a participatory “global playground,” promoting dynamic interaction in real time and the construction of diverse communities of play, progressively more multifaceted, that cross temporal and geographic boundaries (Pearce, 2009).

It is pertinent to highlight that time spent playing can be productive. This productivity can be seen in terms of creative enterprise and dedication put into community building. We can argue that playing is a catalyst in the act of cultural production, allowing players to participate in a proactive creation of entertainment, in addition to different contributions to the playful environment (Pearce, 2009). Therefore, we can attest that communities of play may be observed in various environments, not just in fan communities of certain games and franchises. And that shared creative performances have positive effects and create a feeling of a united community, generating a common empathy in the participants and creating a bond between them and the object to which they dedicate themselves.

Digital games’ spaces were particularly relevant during COVID-19 lockdowns, allowing players to get together and share social practices. For communities of play and games fan communities, this did not imply pursuing a different social space but having a greater willingness to embrace creative practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated loneliness and social isolation, not only among older populations but also younger ones. During 2020, research presented the potential benefits of technology during the pandemic. In addition to existing narratives and discourses, technology plays a key role in various ecosystems as a means of improving social connections, including among young gamers (Marston & Kowert, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted several aspects of everyone’s lives, with restrictions affecting how we socialize, work, shop, and study. These far-reaching changes to our daily lives have raised questions about well-being and how we deal with these unusual and uncertain circumstances (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022).

Digital games and how they were used also underwent changes, such as how they were played and why they were played. These changes in games during the pandemic can be observed, for example, in the increase in the use of multiplayer games, where there is the possibility of cooperation and chat between players, which facilitates virtual socialization. However, the increase in multiplayer games was not exclusive to online games; games where it is possible for multiple players to participate in the same place in person also saw an increase, especially digital games designed for parties and large group gatherings. This increase in digital multiplayer games that bring several people together in the same place was surprising, given that, due to the pandemic, social distancing was mandatory, so this increase was not due to large groups of friends meeting or parties, but rather to families closed at home who needed more forms of entertainment that allowed some type of interaction and fun (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022).

From March 16 to March 22, 2020, a total of 4.3 million games were sold worldwide (Clement, 2021). This increase of 63% over the previous week is in part due to the release of Nintendo’s *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Likewise, sales of games similar in genre (simulation) also increased by 44%, suggesting that many people were choosing this type of distraction to keep them entertained during the crisis (Clement, 2021).

The following section will be centered on the presentation of the case of Animal Crossing, intending to contribute to a better understanding of the game and if it performed the role of a creative safe place during the pandemic.

4 The Case of Animal Crossing

Animal Crossing is a game franchise created by Katsuya Eguchi and Hisashi Nogami and published by Nintendo. The first game dates from 2001 and the latest from 2020. In this article, attention will be paid to the latest title, Animal Crossing: New Horizons. The games' genre is social simulation, and the general plot is centered on the arrival of a newcomer to a new location. The newcomer is the player, a human character that will have the opportunity to build his life in a village inhabited by anthropomorphic creatures, which are non-player characters, with which it is possible to interact. The goal of the game is to live; players may get engaged in different activities that will allow them to progress, such as gathering materials, planting, fishing, and socializing. One of the distinguishing features is the fact that the games are played in real-time, making use of the console's internal clock and calendar.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is based on the gameplay premise of the games that preceded it but seeks to offer a new experience to players. The first difference is the fact that the player begins his in-game experience in an empty island, which should be creatively developed. The player can travel the world and visit different locations, build furniture, and play in a system based on achievements and goals. Online gameplay is the most interactive of all titles, and there is constant encouragement from the game to play multiplayer (Owens, 2021). New Horizons is currently the second best-selling Nintendo Switch game (Reynolds, 2024), in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine. The global pandemic created the perfect opportunity for this known cozy franchise to achieve the global success it invested in over twenty years of growth (Owens, 2021).

The main objective of the game is to make friends with the various NPCs and carry out multiple tasks that assign a certain monetary value (nickname Bells) to slowly reduce your housing loan that the player is "forced" to take out with resident Tom Nook (Albiges, 2021). Tom Nook is a Japanese raccoon dog (tanuki) and is known and adored, or hated depending on the perspective, by the Animal Crossing Fan Community, to the point of being one of the franchise's mascots. Like Tom Nook, there are other standard characters in all titles vital to the gameplay, such as Blathers, an owl, and the museum curator, who encourages the player to donate fossils, fish, insects, and valuable pieces of art to his museum with the aim of preserving them, and if the player has already donated a certain item, it is possible to sell it and obtain good monetary profits (Albiges, 2021).

These two characters are relevant to the game because, on the one hand, we have a raccoon dog that exploits the player's materialistic nature and, on the other, an owl that promotes the collector spirit of the player. Being a game of routines, in which the player must complete several mundane tasks and there is no solid plot like in other game genres with a beginning, middle, and end, these characters become relevant to the continuity of the game. In addition to the various NPCs that represent some fundamental functionality of the gameplay, there are also regular events and holidays that promote diversity (Albiges, 2021).

One of the highlights of Animal Crossing is the freedom to create digital content and the fact that the franchise encourages its community to be creative and share their creations. Due to the customization mechanism that allows players to create their own designs, it is common for the fan community to recreate various scenes from films, series, books, and anime, among other media.

5 Methods of Data Collection

The research follows a mixed-methods approach, having document analysis, netnography, and online surveys as primary data collection methods. The first-hand game experience of Animal Crossing: New Horizons was

part of the secondary data collection methods, which was crucial to building a deeper understanding of the game.

With regard to document analysis, it was crucial for the game franchise contextualization. The corpus of the documents analyzed was constituted by official information made available by Nintendo both on the franchise website¹ and also in the New Horizons title-dedicated one.² Additionally, news websites specializing in games were also searched, and three were chosen to integrate the corpus due to the detailed analysis of the franchise and the New Horizons title: Games Radar: The history of Animal Crossing: How the series evolved from an N64 oddity to a Nintendo Switch system seller (Albige, 2021), IGN – Animal Crossing: New Horizons Guide (IGN, 2022), and CBR – Animal Crossing’s Incredible 20-Year Conquest of Gaming (Owens, 2021).

The netnography was centered on participant observation in Facebook groups dedicated to this game, aiming at better understanding player communities organized around this title and having the possibility of sharing the survey among Animal Crossing players.

Data have been collected in Animal Crossing groups on Facebook. For around three months, from June to August 2021, several Animal Crossing groups were researched, and a membership application was submitted aiming at having the possibility to publish the survey in the different groups. After joining several groups, there was inconvenience on the part of the group administrators in not allowing the publication of surveys for academic purposes. However, after numerous failed publication attempts, two groups showed interest in participating and allowed the survey to be published, namely the Animal Crossing New Horizons group with 30.1 thousand members and the Animal Crossing Portugal group with 2.7 thousand members. Participation in the Facebook groups has also allowed us to assess Animal Crossing players’ relationship with the game. For instance, we have witnessed the sharing of vulnerable moments among the community members, with private details of their lives being shared and mutual understanding and respect on the part of the other members, who take the opportunity to share how they feel or offer help and develop a possible future friendship. Another common type of sharing is the customization of avatars and the game space. In these cases, community members tend to express their support, either through likes (or other instant reactions of this kind) or through comments.

Regarding the survey, it has a total of 25 questions. The questions are grouped into three topics: New Horizons player characterization; characterization of the game experience; and the influence of the media and the COVID-19 pandemic on the acquisition of the game. The questions have mainly single-choice answers, although there are some open and others with multiple-choice answers, and in some questions, participants have the option to not answer. It is important to note that, for ethical reasons, only adults were considered, and the participants of the survey were previously informed that their responses were anonymous, in order to protect the identity of each person and avoid fallacies in the answers. Whereas anonymous responses generally tend to be more sincere, and response rates for anonymous surveys are generally better than those for non-confidential surveys.

The survey was made available in the Facebook groups on September 5, 2021, and in its description, it was requested that only New Horizons players should participate. Data collection has ended up being quick, resulting from the friendliness of the community and the number of members in each group. In the Animal Crossing New Horizons group, the questionnaire has been made available in English so that it was possible to reach as many members as possible; here, 195 responses have been received. In the Animal Crossing Portugal group, the same questionnaire was published in Portuguese, obtaining 71 responses, totaling 266 participants between both groups.

The data collected via survey have been analyzed using a deductive approach, applying a descriptive statistical analysis aiming at taking advantage of statistical ranges, statistical descriptions, and possible generalizations.

¹ <https://animalcrossing.nintendo.com/>

² <https://animalcrossing.nintendo.com/new-horizons>

6 Survey Results

With regard to the sociodemographic characterization of the survey respondents, the sample is mainly made up of women. Among the participants, 91% are female, 7.5% are male, 1.1% are nonbinary, and 0.4% are genderqueer. Concerning age distribution, 25.2% of the respondents have ages ranging from 18 to 23 years old, 36.5% from 24 to 29 years old, 13.2% from 30 to 35 years old, 24.4% over 36 years old, and 0.8% have preferred not to answer. Ages between 24 and 29 years old are those with the highest percentage of respondents. With regard to the nationality variable, the great majority of the respondents of the survey are American (36.1%). The second nationality with more respondents is Portuguese (25.6%), and 24.4% opt not to answer. The most common levels of education among participants are a bachelor's degree (36.5%), high school (34.9%), and professional or other studies (18%); 14.3% of the respondents preferred not to answer the question about professional occupation, while 9.4% stated to be students and 7.5% homemakers. Since this was an open-answer question, a high diversity of professions was identified.

The player characterization section begins with two questions aiming to assess the frequency of play of Animal Crossing: New Horizons among the respondents. To the question how many hours players have invested in the game, 28.9% stated to have between 100 and 300 h, 20.3% over 500 h, and 18.4% between 300 and 500 h. 39% of the respondents have stated to play the game every day. Regarding the experience with the Animal Crossing franchise, the great majority only play New Horizons (56.4%); amid those who have played other titles from the franchise, the title most explored is Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp, a mobile game. 72.9% of the respondents say they use personalized digital content they have created with the Design App or items that are available via download from other content creators, and 74.8% state to consume media from content creators of Animal Crossing: New Horizons, such as YouTubers, streamers, or artists, for instance.

To characterize respondents' game experience, the first questions intended to understand players in-game economic experience; 69.5% say to have already participated in some exchange or purchase of services or virtual goods in the game. Although the majority (55.3%) state that they have never invested real money in those purchases or exchanges. The next question intended to assess if the ability to create custom content in-game is considered essential for the players; 66.5% stated that they would still play the game even if this possibility was not part of the gaming experience. When asked if they consider the "villagers" or certain items on the island to be indispensable to the experience with the game, 62% said yes. And when asked if they have been using the game as an escape to the "real world," the majority stated that yes, it is a form of escapism (74.4%). 74.1% of the respondents are satisfied with the game's social simulation mechanics, 92.1% agree that Animal Crossing: New Horizons stimulates players' creativity, and 50.4% of the respondents state that they do not use the game as a means of communication to get together with family or friends, while 44.4% use the game for this purpose, but this is not the main reason for playing this title, and 4.9% say to play the game especially for this reason. The last question of the game experience characterization section sought to identify the kind of gratification players get from playing the game. Among the possibilities for the multiple choice answer, the most chosen one was "I have fun playing the game," either isolated (16.2%), or combined with other possibilities, among the most chosen being: "I get a sense of Escapism and tranquility, I have fun playing the game" (13.2%), "My creativity has been improved, I get a sense of Escapism and tranquility, I have fun playing the game, I have a sense of personal accomplishment" (13.2%), "My creativity has been improved, I can spend quality time with my friends and family, I get a sense of Escapism and tranquility, I have fun playing the game, I have a sense of personal accomplishment" (12.4%), or "I get a sense of Escapism and tranquility, I have fun playing the game, I have a sense of personal accomplishment" (12%).

The last section of the questionnaire was devoted to understanding the influence of the media and the Covid-19 pandemic on the acquisition of the game. To the question if they already have a Nintendo Switch system or if they buy it specifically to play Animal Crossing: New Horizons, 51.1% of respondents said to had bought the console to be able to play the game, while 47.7% already have one, and 1.1% said I don't know/I don't answer; 47.4% stated not to have bought the game because of its popularity on social media, 37.2% said that was the reason to have bought this game, and 15.4% opted not to answer this question. When asked if they had acquired the game during the quarantine caused by COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the respondents said yes (60.5%). However, 51.5% said that they didn't buy the game as a distraction from the pandemic, while 35.7%

said yes, and 12.8% opted to choose I don't know/I don't answer the question. The two last questions intended to assess if respondents were still playing the game and if they intended to buy the next Animal Crossing title without the need to be influenced by external situations. To the first one, 40.6% of respondents said yes, they are still playing as much as they did during 2020, and 25.9% said that they do not play as much as they did, 25.2% opt for the possibility of I don't know/I don't answer, and 8.3% did not answer the question.

In the next section, it will be presented a discussion of these results.

7 Discussion

The sociodemographic characterization of the participants in the present investigation has some characteristics similar to the player profiles identified by other studies. However, there are also some differences.

Despite the growing balance between male and female game players, there still are more men playing than women (EGDF, 2022). Nevertheless, in the specific case of Animal Crossing: New Horizons, according to Nintendo's official data (Murray, 2020; Robinson, 2020), there is a gender balance, which means that despite social simulation being a genre that tends to appeal more to women (Yee, 2017), in this case, there are as many women as men playing this title. Notwithstanding, the sample of the present study ended up including a great majority of female participants. This may be due to the sampling process; however, among Facebook users, there are more men than women (Dixon, 2023). Concerning age, the age group that is more represented in this study includes the age groups that include more gamers in Europe. According to EGDF (2022), the groups of 15–24 and 25–34 are two of the age groups that have the most players – 73% and 60%. In the survey, the majority of the participants were aged between 24 and 29 years old. Regarding the level of education, among the participants, the majority have a bachelor's degree, which is in line with the profile of players outlined in other studies (Clement, 2023a; Morris, 2021). Among professional occupations, as it was an open-ended question, a wide variety of answers was expected, as it turned out. Among the most common occupations is being a student, which could be somewhat expected, taking into account that the second most prevalent level of education is secondary education and among the age groups 18–24 and 25–29. What was not predicted was the percentage of homemakers present in the sample.

The most common Animal Crossing: New Horizons player profile among respondents is of an engaged player. The Nintendo Switch counts the hours played for each game in its entirety. Taking this into account, it was considered pertinent to ask how many hours participants have invested in this game. The most prevalent answer was between 100 and 300 h, followed by the option more than 500 h. Players with more hours invested tend to play every day. These results demonstrate how the typical New Horizons player is an avid player who invests a lot of his time playing and accumulates a vast amount of hours in the game.

Regarding the success of New Horizons, we were interested in whether respondents had played previous titles in the franchise, with the aim of trying to understand whether New Horizons was an isolated phenomenon or whether its purchase was derived from a past interest. Not only the main games in the franchise were included, but also all games available on all platforms, including smartphones. The results showed that New Horizons is a success independent of other titles, since the majority of respondents have no prior experience with the Animal Crossing franchise. Nevertheless, it was interesting to notice that the title more experienced besides New Horizons is Pocket Camp, a game for mobile devices.

Customization and personalization of avatars and virtual goods are very important for the game experience (Ferreira, 2012; Ferreira & Ganito, 2016; Kim *et al.*, 2015). Games allow players to express themselves in alternative ways in virtual environments. The player's personal identification is one of the results of gaming experiences in these environments that improves gameplay and the player's insertion into the game (Turkay & Kinzer, 2014). In games that allow the player some type of customization, players establish identities using a combination of modalities, including text, audio, and images. The construction of identity is necessary for players to communicate and express themselves with other people who share the same digital space. Avatars are the expressions most frequently used as a player's personal identity (Turkay & Kinzer, 2014). The player's personal identification and the space he occupies in the game are one of the most relevant factors in Animal

Crossing's gameplay, which is based on achieving objectives directly related to customization, which is unlocked through certain tasks performed and the spending of currency in the game in order to acquire more items. The respondents' answers to the question associated with in-game customization show that New Horizons' players tend to use personalized digital content (72.9%). Both content that they created themselves with the help of the Design App incorporated in the game provides the player with free customization tools, as well as taking advantage of the possibility of downloading items created by other content creators.

It was considered relevant to ask respondents whether they consumed different forms of media and art produced by the numerous Animal Crossing content creators present on the Internet and to understand if there is really an interest in these creators. The conclusion was obvious, with 74.8% of respondents confirming that they consume various forms of media produced by content creators. Gaming content consumption is on the rise, particularly video content. According to Statista data, there are over 1.2 billion gaming video content viewers worldwide; Twitch is the platform that counts with the higher viewership – in the third quarter of 2022, a total of 5.71 billion hours (Clement, 2024b). For instance, the Twitch Animal Crossing: New Horizons category counts with over 2.9 million followers.

In a game in which players invest a lot of their time, it was considered important to assess whether they also invest monetarily in order to acquire certain desired items. In this sense, respondents were asked whether they had ever invested real money in the game and whether they had already participated in any exchange/purchase of services/virtual goods in the game. The results reveal that the majority claim to have already participated in some type of exchange/purchase (69.5%). Nevertheless, although they have already participated in this type of activity in the game, the tendency is not to make monetary investments – 55.3% said that they have never invested real money in-game goods. This result can be explained by the fact that online exchanges and purchases made between players do not necessarily have to be made with real money and can be made with other items or with the game's currency (Bells), which makes it easier for the player to acquire what they want without investing large amounts of money.

The experience felt by the New Horizons game depends on several factors that come directly from the gameplay and mechanisms available to players. For this reason, respondents were asked whether they would continue to play the game if it did not allow the creation of personalized content. In other words, they would play the game if they were not provided with an editing tool such as the Design App, which allows the player to customize their virtual goods and avatar without limits, instead of having all the items already pre-personalized, without the option to modify any attribute or detail. Interestingly, 66.5% of the respondents responded that yes, they would continue playing even if they were unable to customize their items beyond what is already programmed into the game. This answer can be justified due to the immense customization already available in the game, without the need for extra customization tools.

There are non-player characters of the Animal Crossing franchise that are present in several games and that contribute to a degree of familiarity among titles, but also play an important role in welcoming newcomers and also in accompanying residents throughout the gaming experience. The majority of respondents (62%) consider that there are villagers or items on the island that are indispensable. Since Animal Crossing: New Horizons is an open world based on social simulation, those elements are essential to guide players but also to contribute to their motivation and engagement. Tasks and challenges are essential in gameplay (Schell, 2008).

Animal Crossing: New Horizon premise is centered on the idea of escapism, since the player embarks on an adventure into the unknown, where he will live on an island shared with anthropomorphized creatures, thus escaping daily life. Games have long been associated with escapism (Calleja, 2010), but due to the fact that New Horizons was launched in March 2020, it was considered particularly relevant to assess if players saw it as a means to escape daily life. And they did; over 74% of the respondents said the game allowed them to escape "real life." Taking into consideration the specific context of the lockdown and the pandemic, this result was highly expected.

Escapism and social simulation games are strongly linked. This genre is constantly growing and contains a relaxed type of gameplay that players appreciate and appreciate (Ahmed, 2021). Simulation games are like sandboxes, where there is a set of tools to "play" with and everything is designed to interact in harmony. In the case of New Horizons, 74.1% of the respondents said to be satisfied with the social simulation made available by the game.

The Animal Crossing Fan Community is known for its creativity, and this can be witnessed in the most varied ways that players use what the game provides and expand it without limits to their imagination. As Animal Crossing takes place in real time, the birthday celebrations that are scheduled in the game after the player is asked about their birthday cause a surprise party to be thrown by their NPCs. This party programmed in the game has the option of being celebrated with other players online. For this reason, many players participate that day in creative birthday activities that include treasure hunts and fishing competitions, among others. There is also the example of players creating their own talk show and inviting other players to participate in the “show,” or reenactments of series, films, and other media. And much more, such as online cosplay conventions, creating music videos with different characters, and even proposing to your loved one directly in the game (Mullen, 2020). With so many alternatives and scenarios available to New Horizons players that facilitate imagination, we sought to understand whether respondents consider that the game stimulates players’ creativity. The vast majority answered yes, which highlighted the relevance of the creative dimension associated with this title.

The question characterizing the experience with the game was focused on the relationship between players, seeking to assess whether respondents use the game as a means of communication to get together with family/friends online. Data from Edgio’s “State of Online Gaming 2021” study (Russell, 2021) reveals that a large proportion of players feel the need for a social connection with other players. Half of global gamers (53%) say they made new friends through online gaming in the past year. And one in three (36%) say the ability to interact with other players is extremely important. Opportunities for interactivity and social engagement are likely motivators to play, with the majority (64%) of global players saying they started playing last year, the year the pandemic began. However, although these data are in line with the previously mentioned increase in the consumption of digital games and other activities related to games in the context of the pandemic, 50.4% of respondents state that they do not use the game as a means of communication to interact with other players, friends, or family. And, although 44.4% of respondents agree that they use the game for this purpose, this is not the main reason for playing.

The last question characterizing the experience with the game was aimed at trying to understand what type of gratification the respondents felt when playing. Being a multiple-choice answer with the possibility of respondents adding their own answers, the diversity of results was high. Notwithstanding, it is possible to conclude that among the most valued gratifications are having fun playing the game, as well as the possibility to escape into the virtual world and embrace its tranquility.

2020 was the year in which most Nintendo Switch consoles were sold (Sherif, 2023); it was also the year when Animal Crossing: New Horizons was launched, and it was the year of the pandemic lockdowns. As already discussed, the game was launched at the beginning of the pandemic crisis, and it is among the Nintendo Switch’s most sold titles. Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a title exclusive to Nintendo Switch. Taking this into account, it was intended to understand if the game was a reason for respondents to have acquired the console. Although the difference is not significant, the majority of respondents actually claim to have purchased the console to be able to play this game.

According to a YouGov study (Shah, 2023), a fifth of global game consumers check social media reviews before purchasing games. A single user has enormous potential in terms of advertising, which can be either positive or negative, depending on the content of the publication (Lindgren, 2010). Among the respondents, this trend seems not to be so transversal; however, 37.2% of the respondents state that the game’s popularity on social media was the primary reason for them to have bought it.

The majority of the respondents bought the game during the quarantine period of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the majority did not buy the game as a distraction from that particular situation. This reason was important for a considerable number of respondents, but in fact not for the majority. This leads us to conclude that the coincidence of the game being launched in March 2020 during the first quarantine moment was the main factor for acquiring it during that precise time period (Clement, 2023b).

The last two questions intended to map the state of the art of playing time as well as to assess the respondents’ intention to buy the next Animal Crossing title. Despite having been relevant during the pandemic, almost 41% of respondents state that they still play the game as much as they did in 2020. And for the great majority, the experience they are having with the game is sufficient to state that they intend to buy the

next title without the need to be exposed to external influences. This intention highlights the success of New Horizons among not only the fan community prior to the game's launch but also new players who were able to experience the franchise through what was the best-selling Animal Crossing game in two decades of its existence.

8 Concluding Remarks

People nowadays enjoy playing digital games for their entertainment value, but they also provide a sense of accomplishment and a platform for expressing one's creativity.

Through the Animal Crossing: New Horizons case study, we were able to confirm that players do, in fact, view the game as more than just a way to pass the time. They use it expressively and proactively, finding great satisfaction in creating and sharing content that is specifically tailored to them. In addition, they enjoy the simulation and entertainment value of the game, as well as the content created by other players. In conclusion, players did not feel compelled to create personalized content; rather, they saw it as an enhancement to their experiences.

As a result, it can be concluded that, in general, players believe that Animal Crossing: New Horizons promotes community creativity and artistic expression. It is a tool for escapism and provides a feeling of belonging to players who agree that the New Horizons Fan Community is a united, helpful, caring, and generous community. We can verify that New Horizons has a set of game mechanics that allow the player greater freedom in gameplay and that the characters encountered in-world are relevant to the experience.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons also emphasizes how safe spaces can be created by games, especially during uncertain times. The evasion into the gameworld looking for tranquility, as stated by the respondents, was a mechanism to escape the constraints of real-life situations. It was crucial to have a safe place to retreat to, one that allowed social interactions without boundaries, one where life is primarily experienced outside, and one where the player is free to appropriate the environment and its objects – all of which can be accomplished by encouraging creative skills. At the same time, it was crucial to appropriate the game spaces and give them significance, in line with Tuan's (1977) proposal of places as a form of "security" and "center of value."

The game's ongoing popularity despite the pandemic and lockdowns can be attributed to these affordances.

Funding information: This project was supported by Research Centre for Communication and Culture.

Author contributions: Cátia Ferreira has wrote the paper, contributed analysis tools, and performed the analysis. Carla Ganito has wrote the paper and performed the analysis. Soraia Gonçalves has wrote the paper, collected the data, and performed the analysis.

Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

References

- Aarseth, E. (2007). Allegories of space: The question of spatiality in computer games. In F. von Borries, S. P. Walz, & M. Böttger (Eds.), *Space, time, play* (pp. 44–47). Birkhäuser.
- Ahmed, A. (2021, January 31). Simulation games lead revenue stream growth for mobile apps in the US across 2019–2020. *Digital Information World*. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from <https://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2021/01/simulation-games-lead-revenue-stream.html>.

- Albigen, L. (2021, April 14). The history of Animal Crossing: How the series evolved from an N64 oddity to a Nintendo Switch system seller. *Games Radar*. Retrieved February 7, 2024, from <https://www.gamesradar.com/the-history-of-animal-crossing/?fbclid=IwAR1PtoJSgibUk0rclnRJ6n7WcYg2f2-iYWvw8vqdfYzdPBMoBYNgkw4oQA>.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities*. Verso.
- Bardzell, S., & Odom, W. (2008). The experience of embodied space in virtual worlds. *Space and Culture*, 11(3), 239–259. doi: 10.1177/1206331208319.
- Barr, M., & Copeland-Stewart, A. (2022). Playing video games during the COVID-19 pandemic and effects on players' well-being. *Games and Culture*, 17(1), 122–139. doi: 10.1177/15554120211017036.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2003). *Community*. Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Liquid life*. Polity Press.
- Baym, N. (2010). *Personal connections in the digital age*. Polity Press.
- Becker, B., & Mark, G. (2002). Social conventions in computer-mediated communication: A comparison of three online shared virtual environments. In R. Schroeder (Ed.), *The social life of avatars* (pp. 19–39). Springer Verlag.
- Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, wikipedia, second life, and beyond: From production to produsage*. Peter Lang.
- Calleja, G. (2010). Digital games and escapism. *Games and Culture*, 5(4), 335–353. doi: 10.1177/1555412009360412.
- Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic worlds*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Clement, J. (2021, January 29). Increase in video game sales during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic worldwide as of March 2020. *Statista*. Retrieved November 15, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1109977/video-game-sales-covid/>.
- Clement, J. (2023a, August 25). Distribution of video gamers in the United States as of January 2018, by education level. *Statista*. Retrieved November 15, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/499707/share-consumers-ever-play-video-games-by-education-level-usa/>.
- Clement, J. (2023b, November 10). Animal crossing: New horizons unit sales worldwide 2023. *Statista*. Retrieved November 25, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1112631/animal-crossing-new-horizons-sales/>.
- Clement, J. (2024a, February 29). COVID-19 impact on the gaming industry worldwide - Statistics & facts". *Statista*. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/topics/8016/covid-19-impact-on-the-gaming-industry-worldwide/#editorsPicks>.
- Clement, J. (2024b, February 29). Gaming video content worldwide - Statistics & facts. *Statista*. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/topics/3147/gaming-video-content-market/#topicOverview>.
- Crawford, C. (1984). *The art of computer game design*. McGraw-Hill.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. University of California Press.
- Dixon, S. J. (2023, August 29). Distribution of Facebook users worldwide as of January 2023, by age and gender. *Statista*. Retrieved January 30, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/376128/facebook-global-user-age-distribution/>.
- Durkheim, É. (1893). *The division of labor in society*. Free Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1912). *The elementary forms of religious life*. Allen & Unwin.
- Durkheim, É. (1950). *Professional ethics and civil morals*. Free Press.
- EGDF – European Games Developer Federation. (2022). All about video games: Culture, creativity, technology – European key facts 2022. Retrieved November 20, 2023, from https://www.videogameseurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Video-Games-Europe_Key-Facts-2022_FINAL.pdf.
- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S., Smith, J. H., & Tosca, S. P. (2008). *Understanding video games*. Routledge.
- Ferreira, C. (2012). *Second life: Representation and remediation of social space*. (PhD Dissertation, Veritati). Universidade Católica Portuguesa. <http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/10195>.
- Ferreira, C., & Ganito, C. (2016). Constructing and deconstructing gender in second life. *International Journal of Sociotechnology and Knowledge Development*, 8(1), 17–43. doi: 10.4018/IJSKD.2016010102.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Polity Press.
- Gordon, E. (2008). The geography of virtual worlds: An introduction. *Space and Culture*, 11(3), 200–203. doi: 10.1177/1206331208319742.
- Grossberg, L. (1992). *We gotta get out of this place*. Routledge.
- Hubbard, P., & Kitchen, R. (2010). *Key thinkers on space and place*. Sage.
- Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo ludens*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- IGN. (2022, March 17). Animal crossing: New horizons guide. *IGN*. Retrieved February 9, 2024, from <https://www.ign.com/wikis/animal-crossing-new-horizons/>.
- Ipsos MORI. (2020, September). Video gaming in lockdown: The impact of Covid-19 on video game play behaviours and attitudes. Retrieved October 25, 2023, from <https://videogameseurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IpsosMori-Gaming-during-Lockdown-Q1-Q2-2020-report.pdf>.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers*. New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K., & Robison, A. J. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture*. MIT Press.
- Jiménez, A. C. (2003). On space as a capacity. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9(1), 137–153.
- Kim, K., Schmierbach, M. G., Bellur, S., Chung, M.-Y., Fraustino, J. D., Dardis, F., & Ahern, L. (2015). Is it a sense of autonomy, control, or attachment? Exploring the effects of in-game customization on game enjoyment. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 48, 695–705, doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2015.02.011.

- Kollock, P. (1998). Design principles for online communities. *PC Update*, 15(5), 58–60. *VRAIS*.
- Kollock, P., & Smith, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Communities in cyberspace*. Routledge.
- Koven, B. D. (1978). *The well-played game*. MIT Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1974). *The production of space*. Blackwell.
- Lindgren, H. (2010). *Factors contributing to the buying decision of pc and video games*. (BA Dissertation. Theseus). Turk University of Applied Sciences. https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/21183/Henri_Lindgren_.pdf?s.
- Malaby, T. (2009). These great urbanist games: New Babylon and second life. *Artifact*, 2(3), 1–7. doi: 10.1080/17493460902937469.
- Marston, H. R., & Kowert, R. (2020). What role can videogames play in the COVID-19 pandemic?. *Emerald Open Research*, 2(34). doi: 10.35241/emeraldopenres.13727.1.
- Morris, C. (2021, November 22). Video game demographics. *Earnest*. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from <https://www.earnest.com/blog/the-demographics-of-video-gaming/>.
- Mullen, H. (2020, June 7). 10 creative ways fans are using animal crossing: New horizons. *The Gamer*. Retrieved February 25, 2024, from <https://www.thegamer.com/creative-ways-fans-use-animal-crossing-new-horizons/>.
- Murray, S. (2020, September 7). Animal crossing: New horizons players are almost evenly split between men and women. *The Gamer*. Retrieved March, 1, 2024, from <https://www.thegamer.com/animal-crossing-new-horizons-gender-split/>.
- NewZoo. (2023, February 8). Global games market report. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://newzoo.com/resources/trend-reports/newzoo-global-games-market-report-2023-free-version>.
- Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place*. Marlowe & Company.
- Owens, A. (2021, April 15). Animal crossing's incredible 20-year conquest of gaming, *CBR*. Retrieved February 7, 2024, from <https://www.cbr.com/animal-crossing-biggest-nintendo-franchise/>.
- Pearce, C. (2009). *Communities of play*. MIT Press.
- Reynolds, O. (2024, February 6). Here are the top ten best-selling nintendo switch games as of december 2023. *Nintendo Life*. Retrieved February 20, 2024, from <https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2024/02/here-are-the-top-ten-best-selling-nintendo-switch-games-as-of-december-2023>.
- Rheingold, H. (1996). A slice of my life in my virtual community. In P. Ludlow (Ed.). *High noon on the electronic frontier* (pp. 413–436). MIT Press.
- Robinson, A. (2020, September 6). Animal Crossing's developers say the series 'must continue to evolve'. *VGC*. Retrieved March, 5, 2024, from <https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/animal-crossings-developers-say-the-series-must-continue-to-evolve/>.
- Russell, C. (2021, March 1). The state of online gaming 2021. *Edgio*. Retrieved October 30, 2023, from <https://edgio.io/blogs/state-of-online-gaming-2021/>.
- Schell, J. (2008). *The art of game design*. CRC Press.
- Schroer, M. (2020). Durkheim and the sociality of space. In H. Joas & A. Pettenkofer (Eds.). *The Oxford handbook of Émile Durkheim* (pp. 333–349). Oxford University Press.
- Shah, K. (2023, January 16). Are consumers checking social media reviews before buying video games? *YouGov*. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from <https://business.yougov.com/content/46105-consumers-social-media-reviews-before-buying-video-games>.
- Sherif, A. (2023, November 13). Annual sales of Nintendo Switch worldwide 2017-2022. *Statista*. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1085606/annual-unit-sales-nintendo-switch-worldwide/>.
- Smith, J. (2010). Trusting the Avatar. *Games and Culture*, 5(3), 298–313. doi: 10.1177/1555412009359764.
- Soja, E. (1996). *Thirdspace*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Song, F. W. (2009). *Virtual communities: Bowling alone, online together*. Peter Lang.
- Steinkuehler, C. A., & Williams, D. (2006). Where everybody knows your (screen) name: Online games as "Third Places". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(4), 885–909. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00300.x.
- Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play between the worlds*. MIT Press.
- Tönnies, F. (1887). *Community and civil society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and place*. Minnesota University Press.
- Turkay, S., & Kinzer, C. K. (2014). The effects of avatar: Based customization on player identification. *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*, 6(1), 1–25. doi: 10.4018/ijgcms.2014010101.
- von Borries, F., & Böttger, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Space time play*. Birkhäuser.
- Yee, N. (2017, January 19). Beyond 50/50: Breaking down the percentage of female gamers by genre. *Quantic Foundry*. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from <https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/>.