

WORK HARD, PLAY HARD
THE CONCEPT OF PLAYBOUR IN ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

Under the promise of complete creative expression, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) has created one of the largest game communities where players *play to work and work to play*. ACNH operates within a capitalist system, allowing players to exploit the environment for materials, sell natural resources for in-game currency, and accumulate furniture. This paper delves into the sugar-coated representation of ACNH's contemporary capitalist system, examining how Nintendo exacerbates the concept of *playbour* (Kücklich, 2005), which disguises work as play and capitalizes on the commodification of recreational activities. ACNH seamlessly integrates neoliberal and capitalist logics into its core mechanics, enticing players to participate in ludic activities that mirror the principles of the *gig economy* and *platform economy* (Jarrett, 2022). Lastly, the paper will present a parallelism with the early simulation games *Capitalism*, *Sim City*, *Railroad Corporation*, and *Tycoon*, which are explicitly classified as *business management games*, and the mechanics of ACNH, cleverly disguised through a specific marketing campaign that positions the game among the so-called *cozy games*, i.e., games in which the ludic action is synonymous with self-care.

KEYWORDS: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons; playbour; gig economy; platform economy; ludo-capitalistic practices*

Introduction

During the global health crisis that occurred following the COVID-19 pandemic, the so-called *cozy video games* gained tremendous success among the public, playing an important role during the prolonged lockdown phases experienced between 2020 and 2021. At a time when our daily lives were completely disrupted, confined within the four walls of our homes, with no clear distinction between private and work life, this type of video games kept us company, marking the passing of days through small relaxing tasks and aesthetically comforting environments, helping us discover new forms of socialization.

In English, the term *cozy* generally refers to anything that conveys a sense of tranquility, comfort, and relaxation. Cozy video games are a subgenre of video games that emphasize a low-stress gameplay marked by simple mechanics, with charming visuals and soothing soundscapes. In these gaming contexts, playing is synonymous with *self-care*, a moment in which one takes care of their emotional and mental well-being. One of the most successful video games usually associated with this genre, is *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (hereafter ACNH), released by Nintendo in March 2020, which coincided with the first lockdown. Amid the global pandemic, the game's release date couldn't have been more favorable: by December

2021, ACNH has sold over 37 million copies¹, becoming the second best-selling game for Nintendo Switch, surpassing some of Nintendo's historic bestsellers, including *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. ACNH has surpassed the sales of the previous installments in the series, the first of which was released in 2001, in a relatively short period of time. By December 2021, the four preceding titles had sold just over 31 million copies in a span of approximately twenty years, while ACNH sold over 37 million copies in just a year and a half after its release.

1. Welcome to your island

ACNH is a real-time life simulator game in which the player takes on the role of a highly customizable character who moves to a deserted island, where they have to develop a community of anthropomorphic animals and decorate the landscape. Once the adventure begins, the player discover that their avatar has purchased a travel package called *The Gateway Package* from Nook Inc., a development company owned by Tom Nook, the island's manager. The package includes the cost of transportation and relocation, a camping tent, the Service Center — an administrative center that will later evolve into a town hall — and the NookPhone, a smartphone used to access numerous services, including a camera, an encyclopedia of the island's animals, the map, and DIY crafting recipes to build a variety of items, and beyond. Moreover, this device it also functions as an access point to a whole series of tasks designed to collect money. The player's first day on the island starts with a debt to Tom Nook: as a matter of fact, the holiday package costs 49,000 Bells, one of the two currencies in ACNH. Since the player will not have that amount of money at the beginning, they will be given a "special price" by converting the Bells into Nook Miles, the game's other currency. This will introduce the player to the Nook Mileage Program, a kind of points-collection system that they can use to repay the first of the many debts they will gradually incur with Tom Nook. It also serves as a loyalty program that allows for access to exclusive items to decorate the island with and gradually make more money each time the player decides to undertake a task. Initially, they should repay the 5,000 miles debt by performing a series of tasks to improve island's appearance for the two inhabitants who have accompanied the player on the new adventure, such as pulling weeds from the ground, collecting wood, cleaning up the beach, and so on. The overall goal of the game is to develop a community of inhabitants, equipped with all the

¹ Data updated as of June 30, 2022. The data was obtained from the sales report of Nintendo's best sellers, available at: <https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/software/index.html>.

necessary services for living on the island, such as a town hall, a central square, a store where to buy furnishings and raw materials, a museum with an attached cafeteria, a campsite for visitors, and an airport. However, Nintendo's game does not have a definitive end but rather can be played indefinitely thanks to the countless possibilities for customizing one's home and, above all, the island itself. The world of ACNH is composed of a myriad of collectible items, which can be crafted by gathering the numerous DIY recipes available randomly during the gaming sessions, or by purchasing them directly from Timmy and Tommy's Shop or from the Nook Miles catalog.

ACNH may seem a very simple game, set in an idyllic atmosphere with cute anthropomorphic animals. However, what lies behind the pastel tones that mark its aesthetic is a game experience based on a capitalist economic system as every achievement is measured in terms of economic return (Bogost, 2020): the player engages in a plethora of activities to earn Bells and Nook Miles by exploiting the island's natural resources to obtain raw materials for crafting items in order to sell them, and accumulates pieces of furniture for the pleasure of owning as many customization options as possible. According to Tom Nook's philosophy, bucolic life and capitalism can coexist perfectly (Bogost, 2020). However, the gameplay of ACNH is designed to emulate and normalize the distortions of the contemporary economic system, masking them using a kind of rhetoric that promotes endless creative freedom, accompanied by a kawaii aesthetic essential to creating a visually harmonious environment. This is expressed through three fundamental dynamics: the aestheticization of work, serial accumulation and hoarding, and, lastly, the normalization of going into debt. If playing is revealed to be a very similar activity to working (Bogost, 2019), ACNH exaggerates this concept by triggering a process in which players play to work and work to play to maximize their virtual earnings.

2. The Economic System of ACNH: Bells and Nook Miles

The gameplay of ACNH is based on a complex economic system that simulates many of the transactions we do in our daily lives. The main currency is represented by Bells – indicated by a loot icon – and it is followed by the Nook Miles, that work similarly to the coupons obtained in loyalty programs. While in everyday life we can choose whether to participate in such point-collecting mechanisms, ACNH deprives the player of that choice since the beginning of the game coincides with the subscription to the service provided by Tom Nook. Bells and Nook Miles have different earning mechanisms: Bells are obtained by exploiting the island's natural resources and selling the proceeds to Timmy and Tommy's shop, such as specimens of insects, shells, fish, metals; on the contrary, Nook Miles can be collected through a system that divides

labor into micro-tasks to complete during each gaming session. While it is possible to quickly accumulate a decent number of Bells by continuously selling items and raw materials, earning Nook Miles proves to be a longer process as each task corresponds to a small number of miles. This consequently influences the amount of time spent working, as some of the most exclusive services in the Nook catalog are so expensive that they require the player to engage in long working sessions, subdivided into small repetitive tasks. Once landed on the island, Tom Nook also provides the player with a bank account at the NookDirect Bank, accessible through a dedicated ATM. In addition to the usual deposit and withdrawal operations we are accustomed to in everyday life, Tom Nook's ATM allows us to repay our debts and access the Nook Miles catalog and Nook catalog. This digital ATM thus transforms into a marketplace, a sort of in-game Amazon for additional services.

2.1 Mortgages, debts, and loans: working for Nook Inc.

At the core of ACNH's economic system is the Nook Inc., a development company whose economic activity revolves around constructing houses and services to transform deserted islands into pleasant communities with natural paradises to exploit for one's economic advantage. Tom Nook heads the company and holds a monopoly over the entire island: the amiable raccoon manages licenses for the terraforming service, which allows the modification of the island's morphology, oversees the town hall and service center, and provides the only available banking service, along with phone services and catalogs featuring exclusive products. Once settled and having repaid the initial debt of 5,000 Nook Miles, Tom Nook will invite the player to improve their living situation, transitioning from a small tent to a small house with a virtual storage space. The initial cost of this offer is 98,000 Bells. Once the player accepts this sort of mortgage, they can move in and start repaying him. Besides not having a deadline, Tom Nook's loan does not involve any interests, so technically, it is possible to continue playing while being into debt. However, every time the player attempts to expand their home or modify the island, they will be reminded of the need to repay Tom Nook the agreed-upon sum before incurring into new debts. Every inhabitant of the island, including Tom Nook, will never miss the opportunity to emphasize the importance of enjoying a peaceful and carefree life in a lush natural landscape. Even though all kinds of construction works are accessible through a continuous debt mechanism, the game does not impose any deadline, and the player is not pressured to repay their debts quickly. While they are constantly invited to enjoy the bucolic amenities of the land and consider Tom Nook as a sort of good Samaritan, the underlying operational logic of Nook Inc. aligns with that characterizing today's *host economy*. Developed

within a neoliberal economic-political system, according to Anna Watkins-Fisher (2020), this model has introduced in contemporary society a progressive “privatization of social life alongside an extreme consolidation of power in the hands of a few, and the reduction of citizens to parasites, as citizenship has undergone a violent redefinition as a condition of precariousness” (Watkins-Fisher, 2020, p.16). The player’s life on the island is influenced by the possibility of unlocking the different services offered by Tom Nook's society and the rate speed at which we can repay our debts to progress to the next level. Tom Nook employs a paternalistic rhetoric to position himself as the guarantor of the well-being of the island community, flattering the player by making them believe that it is their merit if the island is thriving. Adapting Anna Watkins-Fisher's description of the role of the actors in the host economy, it can be stated that Nook Inc. “sells access to the territory and infrastructure, capitalizing on the labor of those who build and use them. It positions itself as a platform that monetizes the content produced by others” (Watkins-Fisher, 2020, p.16).

2.2 The Nook Phone: fragmentation of labor and gig economy

One of the new features introduced in the Animal Crossing series by ACNH is the Nook Phone, a smartphone provided by Nook Inc. complete with a series of applications that expand the range of services offered by Tom Nook. The features include a camera, the Nook Miles program, the island's fauna encyclopedia, the DIY recipes’ archive, a map, the terraforming service, and many others. One of the most important apps is the Nook Miles, essential for accumulating miles by performing a series of tasks or quick jobs, divided into two different categories: fixed standard tasks, right available at the beginning of the game, and those marked with a "+" symbol, infinite tasks organized in groups of five, that repeatedly respawn as soon as completed. This system has significantly changed the gameplay compared to the previous version, introducing a further fragmentation of work that encourages the player to engage in small repetitive tasks to earn a few hundred miles at a time. Game designer Ian Bogost (2020) has commented not so positively on the introduction of the Nook Phone and the transformation of gameplay sessions into a sort of *Craigslist* where players browse for job ads. He stated that “Animal Crossing used to be self-directed, and players would often chat with the animal characters to be assigned favors to complete. But now the smartphone serves up infinite ideas: one completed task just spawns another in its place. Players are motivated to do specific things for extrinsic rewards rather than doing whatever they like for the sake of intrinsic pleasure, and knowing it will be valued” (Bogost, 2020). The Nook Miles app shares many similarities with the mechanisms of the *gig economy*. The English term *gig* refers to a type of work performed

for a short period of time, and within the broader concept of the gig economy, it usually refers to an economic model based on on-call, occasional, and temporary work, thus excluding continuous employment. It is also often used in conjunction with the term *platform workers* (Jarrett, 2022). Both concepts describe the working condition of those engaged in a series of temporary jobs, often performed simultaneously, rather than being part of a singular career path. Specifically, platform worker is used to indicate those who work for platforms like Deliveroo or Uber, which act as intermediaries that connect workers with employers to perform specific and fragmented tasks (Jarrett, 2020). The Nook Miles program and its associated app adopt a very similar structure: they offer the player a series of gigs to add to the daily workload on the island to earn a few hundred miles for purchasing new items or unlocking additional services. The player's work situation within ACNH is complex as they simultaneously occupy different types of positions: on one hand, they are working full-time for Tom Nook for the island's urban and social development; however, on the other hand, their work is also structured in discrete units and additional gigs, like uprooting ten weeds, catch 5 bugs, collect 5 fruits, and so on. Lastly, similarly as a freelancer, they can decide when and how to work for themselves. ACNH focuses on the creative freedom offered by the game in building one's dream island to disguise a gameplay and core mechanics that have deep roots in the mechanisms of today's capitalist and neoliberal systems. The sheer number of objects that can be created, the countless goods available for purchase, and the kawaii aesthetics of the game, manage to overshadow the true nature of a creative activity that is actually generated by a series of hyper-standardized and repetitive tasks.

3. Playbour: play to work, work to play

ACNH adopts the contemporary capitalist logic and directly implements it into its mechanics, which are based on two main actions: *farming* and *crafting*. They respectively refer to “the frantic and desperate accumulation of resources to obtain rare items or other amenities” and the “creation of weapons, equipment, and other objects with the precision of a craftsman”,² often following a recipe or gathering starting materials. The hours spent performing each task reveals to be a form of *play-work* that greatly exemplify the concept of *playbour* (Kücklich, 2005), a hybrid form that disguises work as play and capitalizes on the commodification of recreational activities. This concept was developed to describe the relationship between the video game industry and the ludic-work activities of *modders*, since “although the game

² The definitions are taken from the official Instagram account of PlayStation Italia.

industry increasingly recognizes their contribution, it has no incentive to challenge this view: the perception of modding as play is at the core of the exploitative relationship between modders and the game industry” (Kücklich, 2005). According to Kücklich, the game industry "benefits from the perception that everything related to video games is a form of play and, therefore, a spontaneous and non-profit activity" (Kücklich, 2005). In ACNH, players work to play and play to work: they're grinding the game to accumulate useless and yet cute items to display and they spend their time crafting and farming to earn Bells and Miles, performing a series of repetitive tasks. Likewise, Nintendo capitalizes on the contents created by players, taking advantage of the tremendous success the game has had in the last two years. Following the launch of ACNH, new platforms that stress these mechanisms have emerged. In mid-2020, appeared the first marketplaces for buying, selling, and trading player-created and in-game items, called Nookazon, a trading website that adopts the style and dynamics of platforms like Amazon and eBay to list various items, from fossils to clothing. Payments are always made using in-game currencies, Bells and Nook Miles, and the platform uses Discord to facilitate agreements between buyers and sellers, who virtually meet in the game to exchange goods. The service has garnered incredible success among players as it allows them to bypass the standard waiting times in the game that regulate the introduction of new DIY recipes, furniture items, clothing, and so on. With Nookazon, players can instantly purchase the desired items without having to wait for their availability in-game, and they can also obtain items by offering specific services. ACNH did not only influence players' activities and their relationship with the series. During the lockdown, several companies took advantage of the huge success of ACNH by advertising their new collections through specially designed islands. These practices have not only been adopted by companies and fashion houses, but also by players themselves who create designs to simulate highly sought-after real-life clothing by companies such as Adidas, Nike, and Puma.

3.1 Cozy game or business simulation?

The gig-centric game experience of ACNH can be also identified in how Nintendo promotes the game on the Nintendo Shop webpage. The marketing copy relies on imperative verb forms, such as, collect, craft, fish, scavenge, pointing towards the work activities performed in the game. However, the underlying work-related subtext is mitigated by slogans that exalt a carefree life while decorating the island in all kinds of creative ways. The visuals help emphasize this idyllic imagery by highlighting the beauty of a fully customizable world where every object is cute. It's interesting to notice the game's label, according to which ACNH is an

animal life simulation, as well as *social simulation* in other contexts. This categorization stresses a particular clash that occur examining the mechanics of ACNH along with the game's marketing campaign. Considering these factors, it becomes apparent that instead of being a social simulation, Nintendo's game is more similar to games like *Tycoon*, *Sim City*, *Capitalism*, or *Railroad Corporation*. These gaming experiences are explicitly labeled as *business simulations* and *management simulations*. Also known as *tycoon games*, these types of experiences are characterized by a gameplay focused on managing economic processes and/or urban planning. *Tycoon*, *Capitalism*, and *Railroad Corporation*, for example, are management experiences where players simulate financial decisions, develop new businesses, and engage in trade. *Sim City*, on the other hand, is a city-building video game focused on urban planning and the expansion of cities, while simultaneously managing the population and services. These video games have a gameplay characterized by three features: goal-oriented, business-oriented, and profit-oriented.

By comparing these gameplay dynamics with those of ACNH, the following similarities emerge: all of them stress the need to optimize time and the gathering of natural resources to achieve the desired profit. The primary resources in business and tycoon games are time and money, and the primary objective is to increase one's economic wealth. Moreover, the action is primarily carried out from a god-like perspective to convey a sense of monopoly and direct management. While ACNH does not directly simulate the management of a specific type of business, it creates a game experience that follows the aforementioned principles: to earn as many Bells as possible in the most efficient way; the primary goal sponsored by ACNH is the endless customization possibilities, which translate into acquiring as many economic resources as possible as the main objective; finally, the game experience has a very personal point of view, which is also highlighted by the marketing copy of ACNH, which enhances the need to give the island a personal touch, despite being constantly guided by the economic demands of Tom Nook. Beyond a kawaii design and the promise of self-expression, are capitalist dynamics that normalize the fetishization of goods and the exploitation of natural resources for profit, disguised as a cozy game that is supposed to put at ease the player's mental health.

4. Conclusions

ACNH has quickly become a successful product worldwide to the point where it has influenced our social interactions, our daily lives in a period of social isolation, and cherished our creative possibilities. However, ACNH offers players a sanitized gaming experience devoid of any visual and functional discomfort: all furniture items are charming, none of them will ever break,

and our avatar will never feel discomfort living in a house that is either too big or overcrowded with objects. The gameplay adopts a capitalist logic within a sugarcoated gaming experience, where the repetitive, alienating, and fragmented labor of the player is sold as an aesthetic experience. Even the economic transactions have been stripped of any negative elements, as the continuous indebtedness system does not involve any interest rate. ACNH is advertised as a social simulation game and most of all, as a cozy game, that is, a game experience designed to have a relaxing gameplay to put at ease our stress, our hectic life, and somehow nurture our mental health while performing simple, repetitive tasks. Looking beyond the kawaii aesthetic and the joyful slogans of Nintendo's marketing campaign, however, the game shares similarities with business simulation games and more in general with tycoon games, goal-oriented, business-oriented, and profit-oriented ludic experiences. Early games of this genre, such as *Tycoon*, *Sim City* and *Railroad Corporation*, to name a few, simulate real life business mechanisms, giving the player a sense of time and money management to make profits. ACNH does the same, although under the guise of the freedom of expression: unleashing the player's creativity means taking up Toon Nook's gigs and tasks to unlock his company's customization services, engaging in buying and selling natural resources to earn money, acquiring collectible items that have no practical function, beside an aesthetic value, and continuing earning money to repeat all these processes again and again. ACNH is a game released at a time of deep uncertainty that, by means of its meticulous tasks, managed to provide a sense of stability and order in an upended daily life. It offered players what they needed: a perfect and safe world in which to hide, and this need took precedence over the capitalist and neoliberal system that informs the overall gaming experience. Even today, ACNH continues to capitalize on players' need to find forms of escapism.

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