

Corona Crossing

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Abstract

Corona Crossing is a paper that melds ideas of socio-digital technology with the isolating grasp of COVID-19. The Nintendo Switch game, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* released almost at the same time as the quarantine was enforced in Florida. To me and thousands of other individuals, this game became a place of escape from the dreadful reality of the world. It also gave me, a safe window in which I could keep in contact with my friend and even interact with total strangers. In combination with the social news site, Reddit, *Animal Crossing* became an interesting social experiment that would not have held the same weight if it were not for COVID-19. The unique situation that COVID-19 created, brought the gameplay mechanics and social interactions of the game to a new level. The main gameplay mechanic that benefited from the quarantine was that the real-time clock. The game gave me a social outlet during the start of lock-downs due to COVID-19.

Welcome to Corona Crossing

People have been required to seek out different ways of dealing with the Coronavirus (COVID-19), and the subsequent lockdowns caused by it. Some have turned to art and hobbies while others may have already worked from home, so their schedules might not have had massive changes. For those of us unable to work from home, it began to feel like living in a cell. Quarantine started out as a long month isolated from the outside world, which has continued to stretch for many months. Physical connections with friends have become strained because they are simply not safe. The possibility of transmitting the disease is so high that, even with the utmost precautions, you could spread the virus to loved ones. Quarantining has also put a massive dent into social circles and their functions. My close friend group is very small, containing my fiancée (whom I live with) and two friends. We used to meet every weekend, before COVID-19 put a stop

to that. The main platform that helped me through the last six-months was video games, specifically *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

What is Happening Outside?

Leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak, my life was normal. I had a routine of working Monday through Friday, completing schoolwork, spending time with my fiancée, and playing video games in my spare time. I had been building up excitement for the new *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* game for months; I played the original when I was a child and have fond memories of it. It was a game I had been looking forward to since its announcement, nearly a year ago. As the March 22nd release date slowly crept closer, so did a more disastrous entity. We had been hearing in the news that COVID-19 was spreading across China as early as December, but never really thought that the virus would be a problem. However, as March approached, the situation began to change. The virus spread across the entire globe like wildfire. As soon as the first case popped up in the United States, I knew we were in trouble. On March 9th, a state of emergency was announced for Florida and the quarantine began. Then, on March 20th *New Horizons* was released and, by March 22nd, my addiction to it had begun.

Being stuck at home watching television, doing schoolwork, and playing video games made what was happening in the outside world not as bad. However, there was only so much schoolwork to be done and watching television and streaming services tends to numb the brain over time, as does sitting around with few social interactions. All of this left one thing for me to devote my time to: *Animal Crossing*. It was the perfect gateway to distract myself, instead of simply sitting around.

What is *Animal Crossing*?

For those who have no idea what *Animal Crossing* is, it is a life simulation game in where the player takes the role of a human who moves to a new setting. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, the player's new home is an island. The player is inserted into a mostly deserted island. The few buildings on it have unique uses that function within the gameplay loop. The main shop of the island, Nook's Cranny, works as a place to sell items, to buy furniture for your house, and tools to complete work with. The Tailor is where players can buy new clothing for either their character, or to use as gifts. There is also a museum where players can donate bugs, fish, fossils, and art to be displayed in various rooms. The town hall is where you can access the recycling bin, a computer that has a few functions, and to visit other player's islands. Lastly, there is a mail system in which you can send game items to other real players.

It is important to talk about why the game is called “*Animal Crossing*.” Except for the actual player, everyone else living on the island are animals. You start with two animal villagers who move to your island with you. Eventually, you can have up to ten in total. You can also have other “real” players, using your Nintendo Switch Console, under a different account create a villager who can live on the island as well. Unlike other games, there is no overarching mission that players are working toward. Instead, *Animal Crossing* thrives on short bursts of gameplay in a type of daily routine. The game also features a clock that runs in real time. You might run out of things to do, especially in the first two weeks of playing. These were the game elements I had to learn and play within during my first few weeks of quarantine.

Stress Relief

Animal Crossing really helped me get through that first month, even as the days seemed to keep dragging on. Being trapped in my house and afraid to go outside was wearing on me. The real-time feature of the game gave me something to look forward to, unlike before when I was dreading continued news reports of COVID-19. Waiting to unlock new features, collect new furniture, and take part in special activities was something that really gave me joy. It was like I was playing the game as a child again and living out those nostalgic memories. This provided a stark contrast to outside world, as COVID-19 has been one of the most frightening and world-shaking events of my life. *Animal Crossing* provided a source of stability during a time of unwavering dread. At any moment, my life could have been turned upside down and I actively considered that. The game became a massive stress reliever. When not playing the game, I would spend time on Reddit constantly seeing updates of the outside world, which would cause my mind to skyrocket to new levels of panic. It was nice to have a place to ease my mind.

Social Dynamics In-Game

The next topic includes *Animal Crossing*, but is not limited to it. My small friend group was affected heavily by COVID-19; our interactions were already lowered to once-a-week meetings. With the quarantine in effect, these meetings were eliminated entirely. Although each of my friends play video games, we all tend to have our own genres that we favor, making playing together rather difficult. For one of these friends, *Animal Crossing* became a bridge for our social interaction. Once or twice a week, he would visit my island and I would visit his. These meetings were my first real connection with someone who I was not in quarantine with. Even though the meetings took place in a game, they offered a real exchange with a new person. We were able to talk with the in-game chat, or sometimes over the phone. We would mainly talk about the game, but sometimes we would face the inevitable topic of COVID-19. This was another way of

dealing with the virus, as I had not been talking about it with anyone other than my fiancé.

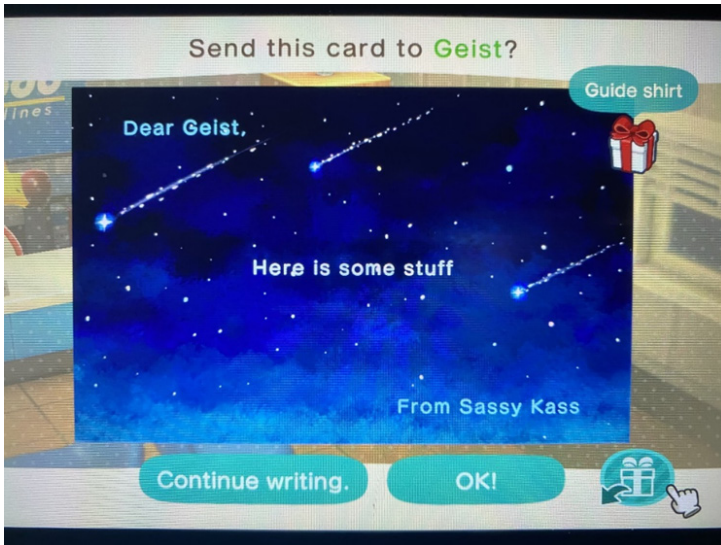


Fig 1. Screen shot: An example of the game's mail system.

Another way we communicated was through the in-game mail system. There, any item that I had a duplicate of, I would send to my friend. *Figure 1* is one example of me sending a gift to a friend through this system. Additionally, while visiting each other's island, we would write funny messages on the bulletin board for each other to discover. These interactions worked great in dealing with any feelings of isolation.

The Social Benefits of Animal Crossing

My described interactions in *Animal Crossing* mirror Chase Guttman's analysis on how cloud technology has been highlighted through the pandemic. He references how COVID-19 has been actively "redefining society's relationship with everyday technologies" (Guttman). The interactions between my friend and I are shining examples of redefined relationships through technology. The ongoing pandemic created a need for online technologies to maintain commonplace social interactions. We have seen the necessity of online platforms expand in the past year. Zoom, Facebook, and other technological platforms have become pivotal to our work, school, and social interactions. Without the virus, I would have most likely paid no mind to the in-game chat features, or how I would interact with my friends through them.

By not being able to talk to friends in-person, my use of these game mechanics was greatly heightened. This is not something limited to Animal

Crossing, as any technology platform with similar features could have been made more relevant given decreased face-to-face interactions. The isolation caused by COVID-19 made it apparent how social we as humans are, and how detrimental it can be to take away our social interactions.

Cross-platforms: Social Dynamics

Another form of social interaction that Animal Crossing provided me came in the form of Reddit. My primary use, as I mentioned above, was to browse the breaking news of COVID-19. With the popularity of Animal Crossing and its massive player base, an economy was created around the in-game items. People wanted certain items that other players would then offer in exchange for the other non-equivalent ones. I was immediately addicted to this unique and compelling aspect of the game. Webpages were then created to allow you to make wish lists for items you were looking for and offer items you had for trade.

Reddit quickly became the best platform to take part in this out-of-game economy. I had already been a regular Reddit user, but had never messaged anyone on it directly. Users would link their wish lists to certain subreddits (category-specific pages on Reddit). Players could then message you and offer a trade. As can be seen below, I developed quite a haggling technique and would constantly work towards getting the best deal (*figure 2*).

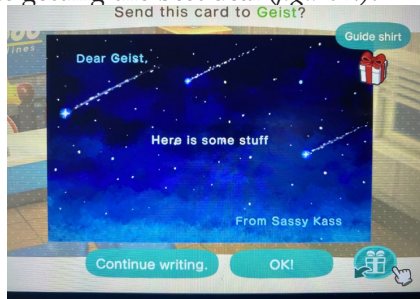


Fig. 2. Screenshot: Reddit messages between players looking to trade in-game items.

Over the course of a couple weeks I stockpiled the in-game currency, valuable items for trade, and built my island to be my own personal paradise. Through both Reddit and Animal Crossing, I connected with hundreds of people I would never have met in-person and bonded with them in a completely technological space. One aspect that was absolutely fascinating about Animal Crossing was the many layers of digital platforms created and used alongside the game: multiple subreddits for trading, the wish list websites, and a page that created queues for people who wanted to visit your island appeared.

All these different sites created ways for people to interact with one another. I developed in-group language that helped connect me to people with common interests. Through trading items, my digital literacy improved, and I learned new methods of communication. When I was starting out, I felt shy to ask someone for a trade, but this changed very quickly. I started treating these interactions like they were customers of a business I ran. I would spend hours each day completing digital transactions while strengthening my digital speech with these customers.

Shift in Digital Usage

There is a high possibility that these platforms most likely would have still been created without COVID-19, but I believe they were strengthened by the virus. COVID-19 gave a large amount of people free time. In-turn this helped people focus on *Animal Crossing* and the various platforms stemming from it. People who had never heard of *Animal Crossing* became aware of the game and its potential for distracting oneself during the pandemic. This can be likened to the release of *Pokemon Go*, wherein people with initially little interest became aware and even played the game because it was a social phenomenon. Like I mentioned, features of the game were accentuated because of COVID-19; I was made fully aware of interactions that I would have otherwise taken for granted. Although Guttman was focused on the business and work efficiencies of remote work, their concepts still ring true here. We have witnessed a social and digital shift in how we view the importance of online technologies. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive eruptions within the realm of digital technologies and has shifted their uses in modern situations. Being forced to adapt to a new lifestyle—even if we didn't agree to it—has been a large part of the last 6-months. “Remote” has become a buzzword and is apparent in every form of our lives. So, even though *Animal Crossing* may not be considered as being life-altering, it did change my life and understanding of digital spaces as I negotiated the start of last year's quarantine.

In the End

Thinking back, it really is astonishing how much the game affected my

life during those first few months. With *Animal Crossing*, I was able to make it through the most isolating months of the COVID-19 outbreak without losing my mind to boredom and stress, and my friends and I were able to continue our interactions with each other from the safety of our homes. *Animal Crossing* provided me with a sense of engagement that was completely missing while being trapped inside. My addiction to *Animal Crossing* helped me through quarantine and the strange months that followed. I found solace in interacting with strangers across the planet, by doing things like selling virtual items. The amount of time I put into the game makes me wonder what I would have done without it. Not only was it stimulating, in the sense of giving me something to look forward to, but it also established a safe means for me to make social connections.

Works Cited

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Tyler Burton is a Senior undergraduate student majoring in History with a minor in Digital Humanities. His scholarly interests include writing, researching, and discussing ancient history with a focus on the Roman Empire. He has hopes of eventually working on illustrated historical children's books with his fiancée. In his spare time, he enjoys cooking, playing with his two dogs, and going on bike rides.