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Social learning and literacy affordances in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

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Key points

• **What is this?** A teacher/parent's reflections on learning opportunities that exist in and around the Nintendo Switch game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

• **Why did you make it?** I am interested in sharing how the game might be used similarly by other parents and also how I might ultimately use the game with students in my work as a university English instructor.

• **Who is it for?** Parents of elementary age children (or above), and teachers at any level.

Tweet synopsis

Animal Crossing: New Horizons offers useful opportunities for bilingual literacy development and the exploration of important social issues. This article chronicles and reflects on a parent's journey in and around ACNH with his three children. #games4change
#learningthroughplay

View at the LLP Playground:

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Introduction

For anyone who hasn't heard, the video game *Animal Crossings: New Horizons* (ACNH) has become a global cultural phenomenon. It is a cute, real-time, multiplayer social simulation for the *Nintendo Switch* in which players each control one "resident" of a bucolic island paradise somewhere on planet earth.

In February of 2020, before COVID-19 descended upon Japan, where I live, I read some intriguing articles about the *Animal Crossing* video game series in general [here](#), and the new release of ACNH, specifically, [here](#). I was not aware until then of the *Animal Crossing* family of games, but these articles piqued my interest. "Couch co-op" play in ACNH would be collaborative and open-ended; there would be crafting of tools and other things as in Minecraft (which my children had also enjoyed for a time); there would be text-based dialogue with characters in the game; and there would be loose narrative arc to provide coherence if not tie everything together. It all sounded promising, and since my children (5, 9, and 11 at the time) were interested as well, I suggested the game as a potential birthday present for my eldest daughter from her grandparents. My eldest daughter and her two younger siblings were thrilled a few weeks later when the game arrived shortly after its release in March, 2020.

At the start of the ACNH, players are prompted to create customized child-like avatars and then to book a vacation getaway to a remote island, a would-be Shangri-la. They choose whether to visit an island in the northern or southern hemisphere, where—because the simulation operates in real time—days, nights, and seasonal weather patterns all conform broadly to regional characteristics within one's real-world time-zone.

Soon, players are whisked away for their island adventure. But when they arrive, they discover that their trip is not quite designed to be a vacation. The island is run by an amiable but ambitiously capitalistic property developer named Tom Nook (Figure 1, below). Tom is a racoon-dog (Tanuki) who—using text-bubble monologues—quickly informs island residents (up to 4 players) that because they have not yet paid for their relocation to this new island, they are now in debt to him and his property development company, Nook Inc. Residents are given a tent, a cot, and a smartphone and told that they will need to spend their days collecting weeds, sticks, plants, and other island items in order to repay their debts and improve their island lives.

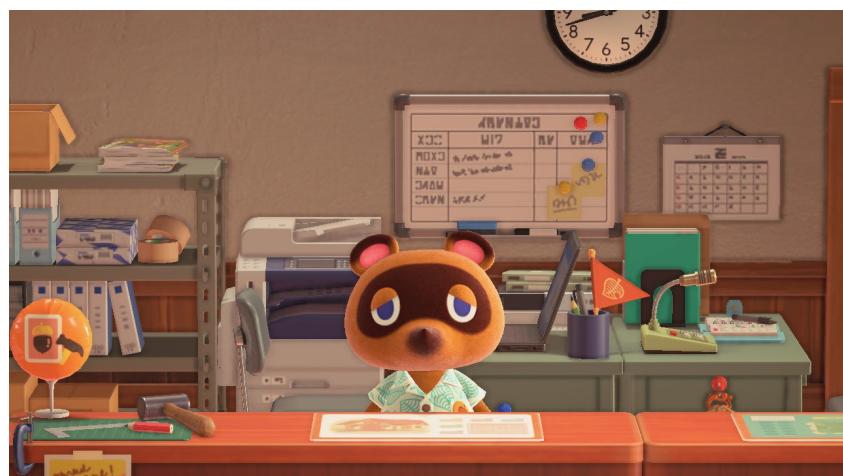


Figure 1 Tom Nook, the amiable captain of industry who controls life on the islands of ACNH, at work in his office.

But, it's not as bad as it sounds, Tom explains. Loans in ACNH are interest-free, and there's no rush on repayment. Without much effort, residents will be able to pay off their moving fees and begin to

upgrade their standards of living in the game. All such improvements will require new loans, but these two will be open-ended and interest-free.

The rest of the game consists of mellow, relatively open-ended exploratory play in which island residents do as much or as little as they like to improve their material conditions while “living” on the virtual island. They can have their avatars (called “residents) craft tools, clothing, accessories, and many other items by following “recipes” that wash up in bottles on the island’s beaches. By interacting with Nook Inc. employees and the occasional traveling sales-animal, residents can also buy and sell items using the island’s currency (“Bells”) and can access various items and upgrades using the Nook Miles loyalty program app on their Nook Inc.-issued smartphones.



Figure 2 An early group photo showing my character (far right) with my three children’s characters in ACNH. Residents spend the first week or more camping out in tents on the island before they can take out loans to build houses.

Residents can also interact socially with a few friendly neighbors who already live on the island or arrive over time. Like all other characters in the game, these island residents are anthropomorphic creatures who are in the same situation as players of the game. Though they are powered by AI, residents can nevertheless visit and chat with their animal neighbors, exchange information, and even give and receive gifts.

Of course, the island also has an airport, and if residents choose, they can use online play to visit other gamers’ islands or receive visitors from “abroad.”

That’s the basics of the game. It is open-ended and exploratory, like Minecraft, but with the addition of a dialogic social mechanic (Figure 3), and the story elements I mentioned above.



Figure 3 The start of a dialogic interaction in ACNH.

Video games in my home then and now

Before exploring the learning journey I am taking with my children in *ACNH*, I'll offer some context about my own history with video games, and the video-gaming situation in my house at the time *ACNH* was introduced.

I did not grow up with video games in my home. My father was a computer engineer, so we had computers in the house before anyone else I knew, but video game systems were not allowed. When I recently asked my parents about the reasoning behind this policy, they told me that they basically categorized games with TV, and didn't want to encourage any more screen time while their children were indoors at home. The policy worked in a sense: though I always enjoyed playing video games at friends' houses (old-school RBI Baseball was a favorite), I would never have called myself a "gamer." Growing up, and even to this day, I would much rather spend free time reading, playing music, or on sports and outdoor activities.

Still, about a year and a half ago, inspired by what I'd read about the learning affordances of video games (e.g. Gee, 2003), I made a decision to buy a Nintendo Switch for my children who are currently 5, 9, and 11. Because I have other hobbies that I enjoy more, I would not have bought a console gaming system for myself, but I justified the purchase in terms of the opportunities it might afford for playful engagement with my children whom my wife and I are attempting to raise bilingually in Japan using the "one parent one language" approach. As a busy college instructor of English, my time interacting with my children is limited, and I was particularly interested in creating affordances for playful interaction with my 5-year-old son, who at the time did not speak much English. Though I enjoy playing board and card games with my children, such activities were at the time still difficult to enjoy with all three children together because of differences in their developmental stages and interests. I thought a video game system such as the *Switch* might offer multiple entry points for my children and me to play together.

And so we were off: I bought a *Nintendo Switch* console for the family, and a short time later a couple more controllers so four people could play at once.

Our first few games were purchased as Christmas and birthday presents or by my children with their "Otoshidama."¹ The racing game, *Mario Kart* was popular for a while, then there were several months of obsession with the open-ended adventure game *Super Mario Odyssey*. Later I bought *Overcooked*, a nominally "cooperative" game that—in fact—courts comical confrontation at every turn.

¹ Monetary gifts given to children by relatives at New Year's in Japan.

I played these games with my children when I had time, trying to keep English as our shared language as much as possible. When playing as a group though, I was well outnumbered, and maintaining English dialogue was often a difficult task. The game system itself was set to English though, and so my children learned to navigate menus and in-game text as a byproduct of their many hours of play. This brought me some solace, though I was increasingly aware that the game system itself was not solving any language education or communication challenges.

And in fact I myself never became a true convert to video gaming on the *Switch* (or any other system). I did, however, watch the device begin to exercise an ever-increasing pull on my three children. Playing games on the *Switch* became a bargaining chip for completing homework and chores, and if I am honest, at times it also became a useful diversion for the kids while I collected my thoughts, read a book, or practiced a musical instrument. I continued to engage with my children in the games they played, but my own preference for other activities never really changed.

I also noticed that when playing as a group of four, my own leadership role as a father was sidelined, as my children were the experts in such situations. This was fine and good, but it also meant that the in-game goals (e.g. defeating the next Koopa in *Super Mario Odyssey*) would take precedence over collaborative problem solving, and (language) learning through dialogue and discussion.

In *Overcooked*—a game I mentioned above which simulates comically chaotic kitchen scenarios that require teamwork among the player-chefs—there were fleeting moments of camaraderie and cooperation, but also lots finger-pointing and frustration. “Is this fun?,” “Is this valuable?,” I found myself wondering on more than one occasion. The lingua-franca in fast-paced games like *Overcooked* became whatever worked; certainly, there was little time for literacy and vocabulary development. And while I get the value of “grit” that comes from “grinding” through the various levels of difficult games, for me, staring at a screen and jamming a controller with my fingers was still not an activity I enjoyed. I joined my children at the *Switch* when I could, but quite honestly felt frustrated when they would see this type of virtual stimulation as more appealing than, say, heading out to the nearby park to throw a frisbee on a beautiful day.

The lingua-franca in fast-paced games like *Overcooked* became whatever worked; certainly, there was little time for literacy and vocabulary development.

Enter *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

My attitude toward the promise of the *Switch* as a tool for literacy development changed with the arrival of *ACNH* in the early spring of 2020. Our game system was already set to English, and so I was pleasantly surprised to see all the in-game text that steered interaction with the game’s characters. Players were prompted to create personalized avatars, name the island where they would settle, and follow instructions given by the aforementioned racoon-dog, Tom Nook. With time on our hands because of Japan’s COVID-19 (semi)lockdown, we enjoyed setting up our characters and island homes and getting oriented to island life. We all made our own characters and set up a system whereby we would hand-off the leader status after agreed upon time periods during our hour or so of play each day. In the game’s “couch co-op” mode, up to four local players could play together, and so the game became a fun activity to enjoy with all my children at once despite their varying levels of maturity and cognitive development.

All players control their character’s movements and actions on the island, but only the “leader” can pick up and keep items and engage in transactions with Nook Inc. employees or other island residents.

The leader also determines where on the island the group moves. This mechanic creates a bit of entropy—with non-leaders sometimes running in different directions or doing different tasks—but it also encourages some level of real coordination and cooperation among players in the virtual world.

In the leader time-sharing system my children initially devised, players would adopt the leader role for 15 or 20 minutes per player, depending on whether I was present. This allowed for equal leadership time. This system exhibited a strong sense of fairness that is often found among children (despite messages from adults that “life is unfair”) which I noted to myself and later discussed with my children. Interestingly, however, I found that before long they stopped following their own proscribed time rules. For example, my 5-year old son was not so interested in the “leader” role as he still didn’t completely understand the ins and outs of island life. Instead, my children tended to opt for cooperative play that valued harmony and established roles within the group over strict rules of play. Thus, frequently my eldest daughter would adopt the leader role for most of a play session, but happily give up control to another player when asked. This kind of accommodation interested me, and so I wanted to explore articulating the values behind my children’s new practices.

Establishing Ground Rules for Cooperative Play

ACNH became a frequent topic of conversation in our house, and as with other games in the past, it served to motivate my children to finish their chores and homework tasks (which were mounting, with school temporarily cancelled). And as with past games, my children began to play more and more on their own, while I sometimes took advantage of their screen time to do other things.

Checking in and playing with them occasionally, I found that my eldest daughter had learned the game’s mechanics fast and had quickly succeeded in building and decorating her new home, planting an expansive garden, and acquiring a variety of items. My middle child focused on accumulating clothing items which she set up in an open-air market for other island residents to buy or borrow. She also developed a strong affinity for the music of “K.K.” an in-game artist (dog) whose vast musical output can be collected by residents. With her older sister, she formed an elaborate in-game K.K. fan-club, complete with its own clubhouse, dues, and a dress-code.



Figure 4 Residents of *Cherry Island* gather for a live musical performance by the in-game pop star known as “K.K.”

During *ACNH* gameplay, my five-year-old son (the youngest of the group) initially mostly just followed along with what his older sisters were doing. He acquired certain items with his sisters’ help, and came to prize a special axe which his character carried at all times, chopping at trees, rocks, and anything else he could hit (chopping or hitting things in the game often causes resources to drop).

My children's play was generally harmonious and collaborative, which was nice to see. However, there were times when arguments erupted, and I also found that when I would rejoin everyone for some collaborative play, there was sometimes more disharmony. Fred Poole, who reviewed an earlier draft of this paper, has noted that such arguments point to how invested my children were in their experience in *ACNH*. Frustratingly for me though, sometimes when joining my children's play, it felt like *I* was the source of the disharmony.

One incident that may illustrate this point involved the use and storage of a shared tool. One afternoon, I joined my children towards the end of their play sessions. We had agreed on 15 minutes each as leader that day, and it was finally my turn. We had previously decided on the location of a new museum on the island, and construction was almost complete. It was a beautiful spot on one of the island's high plains. The tricky part was that the only way of reaching the construction site (and ultimately the museum) was to share the one wooden ladder that we had been given by a friend. When I arrived I asked the current leader (my daughter, Karina) to drop the ladder so I could pick it up when I became leader. That way we could all use it to reach the museum together. My daughter obliged and dropped the ladder for me, but when she did so, my other daughter immediately took the ladder into her possession. I asked for it back, but it had mysteriously disappeared². This was an in-game crisis of sorts because we would not be able to reach our new museum until someone crafted a ladder. But we didn't have the recipe or in-game ability to make ladders yet, so it seemed we would not reach our brand-new museum for some time. I was frustrated, and so were my kids. We searched everywhere, but no ladder.

This incident and others pointed to the fact that my children had formed their own little culture in and around the game, and when I arrived to play, I did not know the unspoken "rules" that they had established. After the lost ladder incident, I decided that there could be some educational and practical value in making some of these rules explicit. I understood that my children would continue to form their own—mostly harmonious—culture around the game, but I also wanted them to be able to articulate the foundational values of this culture.

I took a walk with my eldest daughter the next evening, and talked about perhaps writing up a constitution for our island. She liked the idea, and we brainstormed what the key tenets of this constitution should be. We agreed on five principles to include: fairness and equality, harmony, safety, trust for one's fellow islander, and care for the island environment. Fairness and equality was first because it was a constant reference already when conflict started to arise. My children had a strong belief that no one resident should receive unfair advantages in the game. It was the first concept my daughter mentioned when we started to discuss what should be in the constitution. Harmony was chosen next because we agreed that conflict among players was unpleasant. We wanted to enjoy a happy island life together, and that meant living in harmony with each other and nature. The reason that "safety" was added is a little bit unclear, but I suspect this is a reflection of life in Japan, where disaster (e.g. earthquake) preparedness is a pretty constant concern. Trust was added because there are a lot of common resources on the island. I told my daughter that residents need to be able to trust that shared resources (like that lost ladder!) will indeed be shared, and also that we need to trust each other when we say they will do something or not do something else. Finally, we chose "Care for the Cherry Environment" because we agreed that we did not want Cherry Island's resources to be wasted, and we certainly did not want to see the island full of garbage.

The following Saturday, I was with my children while my wife worked, and so I decided to call a little constitutional convention. With my eldest daughter's cooperation, as a precursor to actually playing

² We later learned that it was stuck in limbo on its way to the "recycle bin" where items go that are picked up by players other than the leader in couch co-op mode. Due to slow server computing, items sometimes arrive up to two or three days later. Unfortunately, we were unaware of this at the time.

the game, we had a semi-formal meeting in which we officially adopted the aforementioned constitutional principles. I found a nice constitution-like background online, appropriate font in *Adobe Comp*, and quickly drew up a document (Figure 5). I let my children decorate the island's new constitution, then I read it out for a "yea" or "nay" voice vote. The "yeas" won by unanimous consent, and though I had no gavel at hand, the constitution was adopted as the foundational law of our little virtual island.

The creation of a constitution felt like a small learning victory, though mainly one focused on my eldest daughter. She has the capacity to understand and discuss some of the concepts and issues involved. Our discussion and creation of a constitution document helped reify these concepts into English.

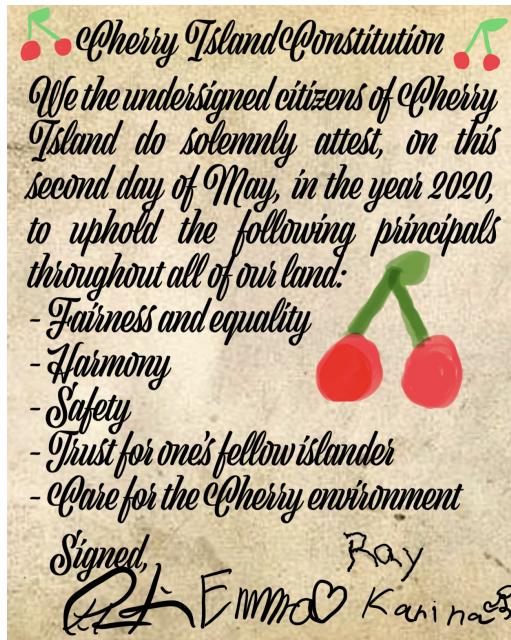


Figure 5 The Cherry Island Constitution I made with my children after playing ACNH for about a month.

The process certainly brought us all closer as well though. Creating a constitution served as a fun new element, enhancing the virtual things we were creating together in the game. For my younger children, the mock pomp and circumstance of the constitutional convention and signing ceremony we held seemed fun and exciting, and even for them the principles we established became a reference point for discussions before, during, and after further play in the game. For example, when decisions were being made about resources, the principle of "Fairness and equality" would be evoked, sometimes with a child picking up the printout of the constitution that I had placed near the TV. Other times I just tried to weave these ideas into our dinnertime discussions about what happened in the game that day. Or what was happening at school or in the news.

Overall, the creation of the Cherry Island Constitution thus served many purposes: it was a focal point for discussions with my eldest daughter, it was a fun little art project for everyone, and it was a way to actually clarify our values about interaction in and around the game. Further, making the constitution laid the groundwork for some additional discussions related to the principles we agreed upon. For example, a few weeks after the constitutional convention, I learned that my children had decided to create a sort of community insurance company and credit union. They had decided that all cherries on the island would be pooled as a common resource. Cherries can be exchanged for in-game currency, and so my children had agreed that they should be stored in a common location so anyone with a financial need could easily borrow them. Of course my children had never heard of the concept of a credit union, and they only vaguely understood the idea of "insurance," but in conversations we had we were able to explore the meaning and basic structure of such institutions, and we were able to connect

them to ideas enshrined in the island constitution, namely: “fairness and equality,” “safety,” and “trust for one’s fellow islanders.” The conversations took various forms with different children (varying in complexity), but having the constitutional principles to reference proved useful.

At some point a few weeks later we made some island bylaws to accompany the constitution (Figure 6) based on these new developments. We established what we called the “Cherry Insurance Group and Resource Cooperative” with the understanding that our island’s primary natural resources should be used for the benefit of all residents. Tools were also designated as shared resources (the lost ladder incident still loomed in my emotional memory), and while we did not eliminate private property altogether, we explicitly stipulated that residents should only borrow each others’ property with the owner’s consent.

In addition we strengthened democratic socialist principles by affirming that new rules should only be adopted by consensus of all residents.

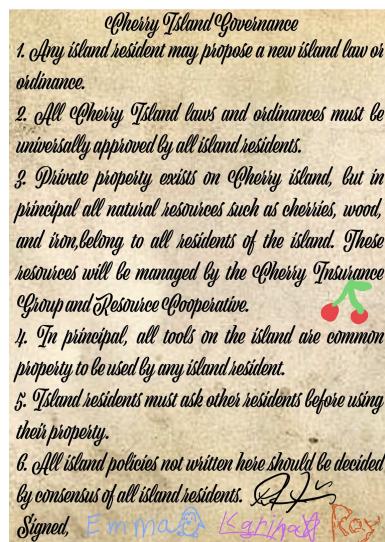


Figure 6 Some bylaws my children and I agreed upon for life on our island.

In truth, though we made the Cherry Island Governance document together, the *Cherry Insurance Group and Resource Cooperative* did not last long. My children did continue to share resources, but they abandoned the idea of stockpiling cherries fairly quickly. Instead, my middle daughter made a brief foray into community banking, filling her house with bags of money that island residents could borrow when the need arose (Figure 7). This project too was short-lived, however.



Figure 7 My middle daughter’s brief foray into community banking.

I got quite busy at work around this time and was unable to join their play very often. When I did check back in, I found that my eldest daughter was leading several joint projects that her younger siblings

had agreed to cooperate on. From what they reported, I learned that they were peacefully negotiating different projects for each of their characters. For example, at some point they decided to all move into my eldest daughter's house and make rooms for each of their resident avatars.

Also, I learned that while my children still hewed to the tenor of the fairness doctrine, they had completely abandoned using a timer to mete out their time as leader. Instead they told me that they just negotiated leader changes verbally. Often, my eldest daughter's character would be the leader for much of an hour play session, but her younger siblings didn't necessarily mind taking the back seat. In fact, they sometimes seemed to prefer playing more minor roles in the game. My five-year-old son would often give up his time as leader for the chance to play a few minutes of another game (e.g. *Mario Kart*) after about 45 minutes of *ACNH* play. He did tell me that he really enjoys watching and following along with the unfolding story of island life, and participating in various ways.

For her part, my middle daughter enjoys discussing plans and collaborating with her big sister. She and her big sister developed their own areas of interest and expertise within the game the way children playing "house" together might create their own imaginary worlds in physical spaces. They used their imaginations to design clothes (sometimes matching outfits), decorate the inside of their houses, landscape their yards, set up little shops and clubhouses, and expand the island's infrastructure by building paths, bridges, and stairs.

Connecting online during the COVID-19 pandemic



Figure 8 Masks appeared as items for purchase in the Nook Inc. shop during the COVID-19 pandemic, though no mention was made of conditions in the outside world. The author's avatar is pictured here in a March, 2020 screenshot.

As I mentioned above, in addition to local cooperative play, *ACNH* also allows players to connect and interact on one another's islands via online play. With a subscription to *Nintendo Online* users can use their island's airport to visit friends' islands or receive visitors. Once a player has arrived at a friend's island she or he can interact with residents in real-time, and communicate via voice and text chat.

With my family mostly confined to our small apartment during March and April 2020 (during the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan), I saw online play as a potential tool for social interaction and perhaps language development. But without established lines of communication in place, my children were mostly cut off from their own local friends. The social interaction that might lead to online play dates (e.g. finding out who has the game, who has *Nintendo Online*, etc.) was simply not possible because of the pandemic. By chance, I mentioned this frustration to a colleague who—along

with her husband—is friendly with my children, frequently playing with them at university events and other occasional social outings. She told me that her husband, Goro-san, was an avid *ACNH* player who was considering the trial *Nintendo Online* subscription that was currently on offer. We thus made a plan to coordinate the timing of trial memberships and try out online play together.

After some time spent figuring out the logistics of becoming “friends” within the *Nintendo Online* system, we were able to arrange our first intergenerational online play date. Maybe it was the Japanese side of my personality coming out, but because our island was still quite a mess I felt a little bit shy about inviting my friend’s husband over, but fortunately his invitation came first.

Visiting another island online can only be done by one resident at a time, so we used my character and headed to the Cherry Island Airport. At the *Dodo Airlines* counter we gave the destination information we had received and boarded our flight with great anticipation. Soon we boarded our virtual flight, and moments later our character was entering the arrival lounge at the airport of our destination (Figure 9).



Figure 9 The arrival lounge at Goro-san’s island. *ACNH* allowed my children to create new, deep bonds with a family friend who cheerfully serves as a playful virtual uncle when they connect for online play.

We were met by Goro-san’s character and were quickly shown around his expansive island. His character had dark skin and a blond Afro of sorts³. When we stepped outside and observed the season and local flora, we realized that the island was set in the southern hemisphere. Whereas it was cherry blossom season in Japan at the time, it was early fall on the island we were visiting.

My children were supercharged with excitement when they arrived on this new virtual island. They took turns controlling our character as they ran every which way to explore their new surroundings. The island was far more developed than Cherry: there were many houses, a bridge, a grand Nook Inc. headquarters, and even a zoological museum and aquarium.

I called my colleague to figure out how to connect the voice chat app and finally, we got the voice chat working and settled into 45-minutes or so of fun, exploratory play. My children communicated with Goro-san exclusively in Japanese, but sometimes they spoke to my colleague in English as they joined into little conversations I would have with her in English as gameplay continued before our eyes.

³ In *ACNH* players can modify their resident’s appearance whenever they like. Gender is unspecified, and players are free to choose from a variety skin tones, eye and mouth shapes, and hair colors and styles.



Figure 10 My daughter's character posing for a photo with Goro-san one recent day when he visited our island.

Before long, I faded into the background and began to observe what was happening. The more technologically advanced civilization my children were encountering led to many questions: "Where did you get that axe? How did you build that museum? What do I need to make a ladder? Why are there so many residents on your island?" What I observed was non-stop learning: the newness unfolding before my children's eyes—mixed as it was with elements of the familiar—provoked question after question, dialogic learning mediated by a new virtual world. These questions continued to emerge naturally as my colleague's husband showed my children around his island home. To my children's great pleasure, he generously gave us many tools and materials that we could use to improve our own island.

What I observed was non-stop learning: the newness unfolding before my children's eyes—mixed as it was with elements of the familiar—provoked question after question, dialogic learning mediated by a virtual world

After some time, we invited my colleague's husband to visit our still underdeveloped island home. We took our character back to the island's airport and returned to Cherry to wait for his arrival, which occurred a few minutes later. My children didn't really know how to play host, but they did manage to give their guest a quick island tour as the exploratory learning continued on our home turf as well: "If you bury a bag of money in the ground, a money tree will grow." "You can expand your home after you pay off your loan." "You can attract new residents by visiting other islands and talking with the locals." Our guest said these things in Japanese and my children recorded every detail in their memories for later use.

The chatter continued in waves, revealing more new information with each cycle. Sometimes there was silence as well: just two virtual characters performing together on the screen while everyone else watched. As someone who had never experienced online multiplayer gaming connected by a voice channel, it was interesting to observe. The telepresence of my colleague and her husband was good company, but not overbearing. Since there was no video channel open, there was no sense of needing to be "on" or committed to any particular physical posture. I could come in and out of the room, and my children could roll around on the floor, interacting with the disembodied voices in the room whenever they wanted to. Though odd at first, gaming in this way felt quite natural by the end of our first session.

Play continued for about 15 minutes on our island before it was time for my children to get ready for bed. We walked our new virtual friend to the airport and said goodbye. On the way there, however, Goro-san (intentionally) dropped a giant bag of money for us. My kids were shocked and elated.

Online multiplayer play was a phenomenal experience that was a first for all of us. I think we were able to play one more time together before our *Nintendo Online* trial memberships ended, but last month just before summer vacation (and amidst a COVID-19 second wave), I purchased an annual subscription to *Nintendo Online*. My friend colleague did the same, and we have begun a new season of online intergenerational play.

Switching the Switch: Language Settings and Games as Social Capital

During Japan's COVID-19 lockdown, I felt my children had learned a lot of English (though I never measured this). This likely came from a combination of factors: more time interacting with me in English, more time reading in the game and other sources, and more time interacting with their relatives online (via video chat and some email). The most significant thing in their lives though was the approach of a new school year (school starts in April in Japan), and socialization into a new homeroom of peers.

Almost all of the interaction I described in the previous section took place in Japanese. My children asked questions, got answers, clarified meanings, shared information, introduced objects and places, and much more, all in their "native" language. While this all occurred, however, the textual interface of our game was still set to English. After playing for a month or so both of my daughters could read and understand most of the standard in-game text, and they asked me when they had questions. When there was new text, they almost always needed help, but as a language teacher I was quite happy to see the repetitive texts of menu items and interactions with other (AI) residents becoming more and more familiar until they were easily readable and understandable.

But after our playful spring break, a new dynamic took form. *ACNH* had been a hit with many children in Japan, and my younger daughter—who was starting 4th grade at the time—began to join conversations her new classmates were having about the game. I should say she *tried* to join these conversations. After a few weeks back at school she told me that she was frustrated that she did not know the game in Japanese, and this made joining the conversations difficult. For example, the unique (AI) island residents all have different names when the Nintendo system is set to Japanese, and of course their amusing catch phrases and other quirky language use is spoken in colloquial Japanese.

Social Artifacts and Social Capital

Games of all types can be viewed as social artifacts (Bogost, 2008). In this sense, they have far-reaching influence beyond the times and places they are played. One example of this was noted above: *ACNH* works as a topic of discussion and even as a literacy tool in my family. But what about its role in my children's social lives outside of our home? My daughter began to beg me to switch the Switch . . . to Japanese. She desperately wanted to join in the discussions that her friends were having about the game. Stated another way, following Bourdieu (1991), she wanted the social and linguistic "capital" that the game imparts, not just the experience of playing it.

This brought us to a negotiation. I explained to my daughters that part of why I bought the *Nintendo Switch*—and this game specifically—related to my desire to interact with them in my own native language, and also my desire that they gain more and more familiarity with this language. My daughters said they understood this, but the younger one made a strong case for her desire to interact with her friends around the game. We came to a compromise: as long as she and her siblings kept up with their daily English reading work (which they do within a program called *Reading A-Z*) the *Switch*

could stay set to Japanese during the week. On weekends, when I was able to spend time playing with them, we would set the system to English. She agreed to this, and was very happy when I set the system to Japanese for the first time. She discovered all the characters' Japanese names, their catchphrases, and likely the names of some objects and actions she had heretofore only known in English. More importantly (to her), she was able to chat with her friends about these things at school, building relationships around shared experiences of ACNH.

Reflection

Animal Crossing New Horizons continues to offer valuable affordances for playful engagement with my children around a variety of issues. As an unfolding virtual experience, it is a frequent topic of conversation around the dinner table and on other occasions. On weekdays when my children have completed their homework and other responsibilities, my wife sometimes allows them some time to play by themselves while I am still at work. Then, in addition to asking "how was school today?" I can hear reports about new developments on Cherry Island. The constitution and bylaws are no longer referenced on a regular basis, but talking about the new things they learn to make and do continues to offer a lot to our family life.

Additionally, I recently discovered that my daughters had decided to expand their world of digital play into their own small literary endeavor: they have been working together during their mostly homebound summer vacation to create a kind of *ACNH* Info Zine (Figure 11). It is a 27-page (and growing) illustrated guide to the characters, structures, and DIY recipes in the game. For me, this kind of self-directed project points to the kinds of natural avenues for literacy development *around* games that I strive to bring to my teaching. It is literacy work fueled by passion and curiosity, and as such it blurs the lines between study, work, and play in the best ways possible..

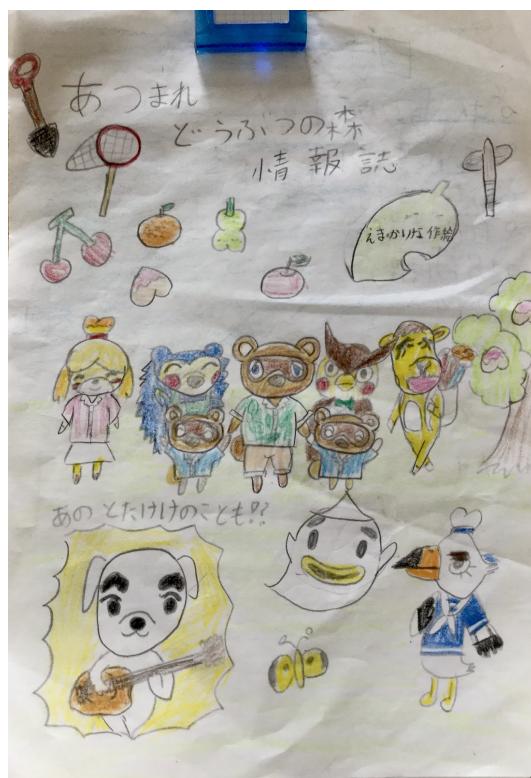


Figure 11 The cover of an illustrated "Info Zine" (情報誌) my children are making about all things ACNH.

It is worth noting that while *ACNH* is just one of several types of media I share with my children, it has become the primary media that I share with all of my children. This gives it a unique place in our family, but does not make it a language and literacy “magic bullet” by any stretch of the imagination (deHaan, 2019). For example, I am currently finishing reading the *Harry Potter* series to my elementary-school age girls, and this serves as another frequent topic of discussion with them. I am reading picture books to my son every night as well, and we are able to engage in some simple conversations about these.

I realized, too, that my own relationship with video games is a bit fraught. Though I see incredibly rich affordances for literacy (broadly conceived) around video games, and enjoy engaging in the discussions that stem from players’ virtual experiences, I am not actually that interested in spending lots of my own time *playing* video games (a fact that may disturb some readers here). I am more attracted to the questions raised by video game experiences, and I see my skills more in facilitating discussions, spearheading projects (like the constitution and bylaw projects), and bringing people together. I like the idea of using games to connect people across generational, cultural or other boundaries, as *ACNH* has helped do in my family and with my colleague and her husband. Books, movies, music, and many other media can do this as well of course, but my experience with *ACNH* revealed ways that a video game could serve as a shared currency for interaction and conversation in and around my family life in ways that other media have not.

Rich, interactive, imaginative play-based literacy development continues around *ACNH* in my home on a daily basis. Though COVID-19’s “second wave” in Japan has now curtailed the possibility of real-world family travel during a second school vacation, our family’s virtual getaway on Cherry Island has served as a fun imaginary escape that lives in our collective consciousness. My children have found new occasions to interact with their friend from another island, and they continue to enjoy the game’s creative open-ended play.



Figure 12 Enjoying a summer “hanabi taikai” (fireworks festival) a few weeks ago in *ACNH*

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Turning back to a new semester at the Japanese university where I work, I have begun to think more about ways to apply what I learned from my family’s experience of *ACNH* to helping my students develop greater English literacy. For the time being, extra-curricular face-to-face meetings are not possible, but I am hopeful that when such gatherings become possible again I will be able to find ways to leverage learning affordances in *ACNH* in ways that lead to deep learning and transformation.

As I mulled the possibilities, I consulted with Jonathan deHaan, a local friend and colleague, and the co-founder of this journal. Surely, *ACNH* would offer some great opportunities for student engagement, discussions about values (capitalism, consumerism, life values, the environment, etc.) and even

perhaps some kind of virtual study abroad, I thought. Jonathan's response to my ideas was encouraging, but also astutely cautious. He advised me that he saw the most value in projects that could be sustained long-term, and advised against anything that might not be able to continue to grow and offer value on a regular basis. I realized from Jonathan's comments that any value my engagement around *ACNH* with my kids is what accrues from the consistency of our engagement in and *around* the game. Jumping into anything like this in an institutional context would require either a very solid plan, or at least a commitment to some type of consistency. Without the bonds of family and the shared "habitus" generated by family life, I would need more planning and commitment to see the benefits I envision and to create the kind of dynamism around the game I experienced in my home.

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Over the coming months, I'd like to spend time reading and thinking about best practices for growing and sustaining what Gee & Hayes (2011) call "affinity spaces" around video games such as *ACNH*. I also hope I can establish some new connections for collaboration with teachers and students at other universities. *ACNH* has offered so many playful and fun opportunities for learning and growth in my family and beyond, and I'm eager to see what can be done in more formal learning contexts.

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